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The Rise of Comrade Literature

Development and Significance of a New Chinese Genre

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孙中山

*Revolution has not yet prevailed.
Comrades, keep up the good work!*

- Sun Yat-sen

”

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| I: INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| <i>The history of homosexuality in China</i> | 1 |
| <i>The Internet: communication and communities</i> | 5 |
| ‘Comrade’ | 7 |
| ‘Literature’ | 7 |
| <i>Further remarks on the notion of Comrade Literature</i> | 9 |
| II: DEVELOPMENT OF THE GENRE | 10 |
| <i>First Generation:</i> | |
| Till Death Do Us Part... | 14 |
| <i>A Story From Beijing</i> | 14 |
| <i>Wounded Youth</i> | 17 |
| <i>Second Generation:</i> | |
| Happy Family? | 20 |
| Huizi | 20 |
| <i>I Have a Little Brother</i> | 23 |
| <i>Two Men, Two Women</i> | 25 |
| Tips & Tricks | 30 |
| <i>Single-Winged Angels</i> | 31 |
| <i>One Night in Beijing</i> | 32 |
| Campus Life | 39 |
| <i>Purple Rain Love</i> | 39 |
| <i>Boys and Leaves</i> | 43 |
| <i>Zhao Xiaoming in Love</i> | 46 |
| <i>Lovers under a Starry Sky</i> | 52 |
| <i>Third Generation:</i> | |
| The Art of Writing | 57 |
| <i>Butterfly Lovers: The Real Story of Liang and Zhu</i> | 57 |
| <i>The Story of Little Wen</i> | 61 |
| <i>The Illusive Mind</i> | 69 |
| <i>Hyperbolic Love</i> | 73 |
| III: CONCLUSION | 78 |
| <i>Public awareness</i> | 78 |
| <i>Comrade Literature, subculture and self-awareness</i> | 81 |
| <i>The Internet and other media</i> | 83 |
| WORKS CITED | 86 |
| FURTHER READING | 91 |

I: INTRODUCTION

This thesis describes the development of a literary genre that came into existence when the homosexual subculture in the People's Republic of China (PRC) found its refuge on the Internet in the late 1990s – a genre that is now commonly referred to as 'Comrade Literature' (同志文学). Because the genre is directly linked to a specific social group, namely Chinese gay people, we need an understanding of the history and conditions of the subculture from which the genre emerged. This introduction provides a preliminary outline of social, historical and (sub)cultural backgrounds to this new genre. I will then explain its name, and describe the factors that have played a decisive role in its emergence. Finally, I will define the scope of the genre within the context of this thesis.

In the main part of this thesis I will illustrate how the genre has developed over the years, by analysing selected samples of Comrade Literature. Although the focus will be on the texts themselves, on how they are interrelated and what this might tell us about the genre's overall development, we will see that the contents of these stories also yield information about the simultaneous development of the Chinese gay subculture in general. In the final chapter I will reflect on some of the changes that have taken place in that quarter, with special emphasis on the interaction between the genre and the subculture.

The goal of this thesis as a whole is to document and explain the rise of Comrade Literature, and to describe its significance for the gay subculture in the PRC.

The history of homosexuality in China

China has a long, documented history of mainly male but also female homosexuality. Modern research in this field often claims that the history of homosexuality in China began in the days of the Yellow Emperor (27th century BCE), the legendary ancestor of all Chinese people, referring to a remark in Ji Yun's *Notes from the Thatched Cottage of Close Scrutiny*: 'Rumours go that catamites date from the time of the Yellow Emperor.'¹ Although it is very well possible that homosexuality did exist in those days, the text on which the assumption is based was published more than four thousand years later, thus making it an unreliable source. However, in the *Book of Documents*, one of the Chinese Classics, a source from the 18th century BCE explicitly mentions homosexuality, and it is generally considered to be the first

¹ 紀昀 (1724-1805): 《閱微草堂筆記》(第 12 卷): “雜說稱變童始于黃帝”。

documented reference to the phenomenon.² This is the passage concerned from the *Book of Documents: Documents from the Shang, The Instructions of Yi* as translated by James Legge:³

If you dare to have constant dancing in your palaces, and drunken singing in your chambers, – that is called sorcerers’ fashion; if you dare to set your hearts on wealth and women, and abandon yourselves to wandering about or to hunting, – that is called the fashion of dissipation; if you dare to condemn the words of sages, to resist the loyal and upright, to put far from you the aged and virtuous, and to be familiar with procacious youths (比頑童), – that is called the fashion of disorder.⁴

Clae Waltham points out that *procacious* is ‘apparently a misspelling of a euphemism for ‘sodomitic’ (*proctacious*).’⁵ Although it is questionable whether this is indeed a misspelling in Legge’s translation, we can safely assume that the passage does refer to acts of a homosexual nature. The term ‘procacious (or: insolent) youths’ should be read in this context as ‘gigolos’ or ‘catamites’. The use of euphemisms for referring to homosexuality – or to sexual matters in general – has been a continuous trend throughout Chinese tradition. These euphemisms are often derived from ancient (literary) texts that mention homosexuality or contain homoerotic themes and elements. Some of these sources are so authoritative that referring to the regarding text has become an allusion to homosexual love, and the key words by which these texts are indicated have become synonymous to ‘homosexual’.⁶ Perhaps the most famous example of such an euphemism is ‘the cut sleeve’ (斷袖), referring to a passage in the biography of Dong Xian (董賢) in the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*, which took place during the reign of Emperor Ai (哀帝) when both men were in their early twenties:

He [Dong Xian] often slept together with the Emperor. One time, when they were resting in daytime, he lay on the Emperor’s sleeve. When the Emperor wanted to get up, Xian had not yet woken. He did not want to disturb Xian, and therefore he cut off his sleeve after which he got up. So deep were his feelings of affection and love for him.⁷

² 刘达临 (Liu Dalin): 《性与中国文化》 (*Sex and Chinese Culture*). 北京: 人民出版社, 1999 (p. 574).

³ Legge, James: *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 3 (*The Shoo King*). London: Henry Frowde, 1865.

⁴ 《書經·商書·伊訓》: 敢有恆舞于宮. 酣歌于室. 時謂巫風. 敢有殉于貨色. 恆于遊畋. 時謂淫風. 敢有侮聖言. 逆忠直. 遠耆德. 比頑童. 時謂亂風.

⁵ Waltham, Clae: *Shu Ching, Book of History: A Modernized Edition of the Translations of James Legge*. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1971 (p. 75, note).

⁶ For an overview, see: 张在舟 (Zhang Zaizhou): 《曖昧的历程: 中国古代同性恋史》 (*Tradition of Secret Love: The History of Homosexuality in China*). 郑州: 中州古籍出版社, 2001 (pp. 9-19).

⁷ 《漢書·董賢傳》: 常与上臥起. 嘗晝寢. 偏藉上袖. 上欲起. 賢未覺. 不欲動賢. 乃斷袖而起. 其恩愛至此.

Nowadays, numerous books and articles by Chinese and Western scholars are available in which the history of homosexuality in pre-modern China is described, based on accounts in ancient (literary) texts.⁸ What becomes evident from these studies is that homosexual love has always been a customary and often openly acknowledged phenomenon in pre-modern China, especially among the elite.⁹ The liberal attitude towards homosexuality was even noticed by Western travellers – mostly Jesuit missionaries – who visited China in the late Imperial era. They were genuinely impressed with many aspects of Chinese culture, but in their accounts they unanimously condemned the popularity of ‘the abominable vice of sodomy’, which in their eyes ‘was an unforgivable flaw in an otherwise admirable society’.¹⁰

In spite of the seemingly tolerant outlook on homosexual behaviour in Imperial China, same-sex relationships were always of a ‘concubinary’ nature and never came close to obtaining anything like ‘marital’ status. A modern perception such as ‘gay lifestyle’ would be irreconcilable with Chinese Confucian tradition, in which marriage is not only of great social importance, but is also considered a prerequisite for the important filial obligation of procreation in order to carry on the lineage of one’s ancestors. The importance traditionally adhered to marriage continues to play an important role in present-day China. But in Chinese tradition homosexual practice was not a problem as long as filial obligations were fulfilled, whereas in Christian tradition ‘sodomy’ in itself is regarded as a sin.

Towards the end of the Imperial era, through increased cultural exchange and missionary efforts, more and more Western notions were ‘imported’ to China – including homophobia. However, it is difficult to trace exactly what changes occurred in the general view on homosexuality for this period, due to the almost permanent state of social unrest. After the last emperor abdicated in 1912, China entered the tumultuous Republican era. Local warlords continuously revolted against the central Kuomintang (國民黨) government, Japanese forces occupied large parts of Chinese territory, and after a joint military operation against the Japanese a civil war broke out between the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party (中国共产党). The Republican government was eventually overthrown by the Communists. In 1949 Mao Zedong (毛泽东) founded the People’s Republic of China (中华人民共和国), and communism became the new official ideology.

⁸ China also has a rich tradition of figurative art with homoerotic themes. For an overview, see: 刘达临 (Liu Dalin): 《中国性史图鉴》 (*Illustrated Handbook of Chinese Erotic Culture*). 长春: 时代文艺出版社, 2000. Vol. 2, pp. 264-291: 《同性恋和性变态》 (*Homosexuality and Anomalous Sexual Behaviour*).

⁹ 谈大正 (Tan Dazheng): 《性文化与法》 (*Sexual Culture and Law*). 上海: 上海人民出版社, 1998 (p. 307).

¹⁰ Hinsch, Bret: *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*. Berkeley [etc.]: University of California Press, 1990 (*Introduction*).

During the first decades of the PRC, numerous movements were launched by the government to eradicate remnants of China's 'feudal past' (封建时代). The goal was to establish communism as the leading ideology on all levels of Chinese society, not leaving one individual unaffected. The height of this normative standardization process was reached during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (无产阶级文化大革命) from 1966 to 1976. Homosexuality – along with prostitution, adultery and eroticism in general – was seen as a feudal vice and homosexuals were persecuted as 'reactionary elements' (反动分子) that had to be re-educated. Another influential element of communist ideology in this respect was the puritan perception of marriage. Love and marriage were to be constituted on revolutionary rather than romantic sentiments, and the union between two persons had to serve the realization of an ideal socialist state. Families were seen as revolutionary units, and one of their tasks was to produce revolutionary offspring. In that light, homosexuality was regarded as a selfish and heretic desire that conflicted with the social demand of subordinating one's personal interests completely to the common cause, i.e. the ideals of communist ideology.

The Cultural Revolution came to an end when Mao Zedong died in 1976, and after a short, Party-internal power struggle Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) became China's new political leader. He denounced the excesses that had taken place during the Cultural Revolution, for which he held the Gang of Four¹¹ (四人帮) responsible. In 1978 he launched his Reform and Open Door Policy (改革开放) after which the economic, political and social situation in China began to improve. However, although homosexuals were no longer actively persecuted, it remained difficult for them to openly express their sexual preference during the 1980s and early 1990s. It is interesting to see that the trends in Chinese publications on homosexuality from this period vary from conservative and strictly socialist viewpoints to rather liberal approaches.

One work that stands out for its effort to provide an overview of the social conditions of Chinese homosexuals is *Their World*, by Li Yinhe and her husband Wang Xiaobo.¹² Dr. Li works at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (中国社会科学院) and was the first scholar from the PRC to perform a survey among gay men. *Their World* presents the results of her research, which took place between 1989 and 1991, and provides candid insight to the lives of Chinese homosexuals at that time. It becomes clear from the respondents' stories that

¹¹ Jiang Qing (江青), Zhang Chunqiao (张春桥), Yao Wenyuan (姚文元) and Wang Hongwen (王洪文).

¹² 李银河 (Li Yinhe) & 王小波 (Wang Xiaobo): 《他们的世界——中国男同性恋群落透视》 (*Their World: An Insight in the Chinese Male Homosexual Community*). 太原: 山西人民出版社, 1992.

gay people would hide their sexual preference from their family members and even their closest friends. They felt that Chinese society would not understand or tolerate their 'abnormal' behaviour, and most of the working respondents even feared losing their job if their colleagues were to find out. Respondents of 30 years and older were almost all married, or had been married and divorced. Although they indicated that they never intended to marry, these men felt pressured to do so out of filial piety towards their parents. The customary importance of marriage had not faded during the efforts in the previous decades to wipe out traditional thinking.

Their World also describes how public places, especially parks, served as meeting places for homosexuals. Several respondents claimed that Beijing alone had 55 of these spots at the time, although none of them could provide a full overview. Apparently the news about these locations was spread by word of mouth, with the result that certain public places became spots where homosexuals would gather and meet. The men would typically visit a public toilet in a park, preferably in the evening, where they could establish whether someone else was gay from the other person's behaviour. Public toilets and parks were also where gay men would talk to other gay men, and where they made love. In that way, they did not have to reveal their identity. To further reduce the risk of raising the park surveillance officers' suspicion or being seen by acquaintances, they avoided going to any one place too often and alternately visited different locations. However, if homosexuals were caught in the act, they would occasionally be arrested for 'hooliganism' (流氓罪) or simply for disturbing public order.

Although *Their World* already mentions the existence of some underground gay bars, it cannot be said that there was a well-organized homosexual subculture up until the mid 1990s. The constant apprehension of being exposed as a homosexual put a strain on the formation of a cohesive social community. There was no bonding factor that could mould the whole of ephemeral contacts and unconfirmed tidings into one organized subculture, and there was not even a safe haven for such a community to settle. But soon an unanticipated development would offer new perspectives.

The Internet: communication and communities

In 1994, the first Internet connection was established in China. Since then, this new form of mass communication has proliferated at an astonishing pace. As of December 2004, China had 94 million Internet users, which made it the country with the highest number of netizens after the USA (198 million). Expectations are that with China's economic growth the

nationwide penetration rate of Internet usage (currently only 7.3%, compared to for example 52.8% in Japan and 63.3% in South Korea) will continuously increase.¹³

The Internet is a highly interactive medium that allows people to share information in many formats and communicate in many ways. What makes it an attractive medium for Chinese homosexuals is that communication over the Internet offers a fairly high level of anonymity. Accessing the Internet from home or from an Internet café enables gay people to communicate without the danger of being exposed. Especially chat rooms and discussion boards are instruments on the Web that offer such mass communication services.

In general, chat rooms and discussion boards are part of websites dedicated to a certain topic, where visitors can talk about related issues in real-time (chat), or post messages to which other users can reply later on (discussion boards). There are also websites specially dedicated to host discussion forums on many different topics. What these discussion forums have in common though, is that all visitors and contributors to a particular forum generally share the same interest or belong to a certain peer group. For example, there are dating chat rooms for people in certain age groups, and there are discussion boards for webmasters, art historians and so on. These groups of people that visit certain websites and join discussions on related issues are often referred to as online ‘communities’.

On the Chinese Internet, discussion forums (论坛) are extremely popular. Ever since the Internet became available in China, these discussion boards (or BBS-s) have flourished. BBS is short for Bulletin Board System, which in its Web-based form can be used to post text messages, pictures and even other file types, that can be viewed by community members who can reply to the original posting, resulting in a discussion ‘thread’.

Given the new possibilities of mass communication that the Internet offered, and the precarious social position of Chinese homosexuals in the mid 1990s, it is not surprising that a thriving community of gay netizens rapidly emerged. By now, there are numerous Chinese gay websites with contents of both informative and divertive nature, and as we will see later this web-based community has become an important bonding factor for the gay subculture in China. Practically all of these websites have discussion boards and/or chat rooms in which members communicate and contribute to the websites’ contents. It is also the environment in which Comrade Literature was born.

¹³ Statistics from <http://www.internetworldstats.com> (viewed on 12 February 2005).

‘Comrade’

The word ‘comrade’, or in Chinese *tóngzhì* (同志), literally means ‘of the same intent’. It was widely used as a form of address in Chinese communist discourse until after the Cultural Revolution, and was allegedly first used in Hong Kong around 1990 to refer to homosexuals. Before long, gay people in Taiwan and the PRC also started to use the word ‘comrade’, as opposed to the clinical ‘homosexual’ (同性恋). In spite of its original political connotation, which initially gave the word a sarcastic feel, ‘comrade’ is currently a common expression in Chinese for referring to gay people. This new meaning of the word has become so widely known that even some conservative Chinese will now think twice before addressing someone with ‘comrade’.¹⁴

Within the gay subculture, the word ‘comrade’ can be used for both gay men and gay women, and is sometimes specified by adding a male / female prefix (男同志 / 女同志). In addition, the English word ‘gay’ (or simply ‘G’) is also used in China for referring to gay men. Gay women are most commonly referred to as *lālā* (拉拉 or 啦啦), which is onomatopoeically derived from the word ‘lesbian’ in English. In its abridged form, ‘les’ is also a current expression in Chinese gay circles.

‘Literature’

Knowing that ‘comrade’ is actually a common expression for ‘gay’ in Chinese, one might conclude that ‘Comrade Literature’ is a collective term for all Chinese literature that has something to do with homosexuality. Although this interpretation is not completely incorrect, it is not quite satisfactory either, because Comrade Literature is not merely a new genre within the Chinese tradition of literary writing in the broadest sense. As we have seen, it was virtually impossible for a gay community in the PRC to organize itself, let alone to publish literature with homosexual themes. From the seclusion of its Web-based environment Comrade Literature has emerged as the product of a subculture, and it has only recently begun to take steps towards mainstream Chinese literary traditions. If we want to grasp the scope and meaning of the phrase ‘Comrade Literature’, we should also have a closer look at the ‘literature’ part. The word ‘literature’ is easily associated with many features that are not

¹⁴ For a documented record of this observation, see: 潘绥铭 (Pan Suiming) & 曾静 (Zeng Jing): 《中国当代大学生的性观念与性行为: 1991~1997》 (*Sexual Awareness and Behaviour among Contemporary Chinese University Students: 1991-1997*). 北京: 商务印书馆, 2000 (p. 362).

necessarily applicable to the genre under scrutiny, and certainly not relevant for my analysis in this thesis.

From a modern, Western perception, literature is generally seen as an artistic product, ‘a form of language use which primarily emphasizes the aesthetic function rather than the communicative function’.¹⁵ This might be valid for many acclaimed literary works across literary traditions, but as we will see later on, the communicative aspect in Comrade novels is often equally and sometimes more important than the aesthetic aspect. Incidentally, in the traditional Chinese view of literature as ‘conveyor of the Way’ (文以載道), the communicative function is predominantly important, albeit usually with a strongly moralistic tendency. There are also broader definitions of literature, for example: ‘any kind of writing which for some reason or another somebody values highly’.¹⁶ This definition takes into account that the appreciation of texts may vary in different times and among different cultures. However, the problem with ‘literature’ as a concept in general discourse is that it often implies a value judgment of a text’s artistic qualities, in such sense that it is a decisive factor for identifying a text as belonging to ‘the’ (commonly acclaimed, highly distinguished, mainstream) literary tradition.

The texts that I discuss in this thesis were published on the Internet under the name Comrade Literature. But as this particular genre has developed within a relatively isolated environment – a community of gay netizens – ‘literature’ does not refer to a universal concept as in the above definitions; it merely represents a certain type of texts within that community. For comparison, when the term ‘news’ is used in the same context, it usually does not refer to world politics or the eight o’clock bulletin, but to tidings within the gay community that may even seem trivial to outsiders. Therefore, when I use the word ‘literature’ in my analysis, it is not to make a value judgment but just to address my object of study by its proper name. Similarly, I will refer to each separate text as ‘story’ or ‘novel’, based on the original designation (同志小说).

What the term novel/story does imply is that these texts are *fiction*, i.e. texts containing characters and plots that are ‘invented’ by an author, although they may be realistic and contain (auto)biographical elements. As such, style and plot (artistic qualities!) are certainly discussed in the stories’ analyses, albeit only in order to compare them with other Comrade novels and not to judge them by a ‘general’ standard. The goal of this

¹⁵ Idema, Wilt & Lloyd Haft: *A Guide to Chinese Literature*. Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1997 (*Introduction*).

¹⁶ Eagleton, Terry: *Literary Theory: An Introduction (Second Edition)*. Oxford [etc.]: Blackwell, 1996 (*Introduction*).

approach is to give an overview of the genre and demonstrate its development over the past decade.

Further remarks on the notion of Comrade Literature

The renowned Taiwanese writer Kenneth Hsien-yung Pai (白先勇) is openly gay and his novel *Crystal Boys* 《孽子》, which was first completely published in 1983,¹⁷ tells the story of Taiwanese homosexuals in the 1970s. At that time, Taiwanese society was not much more tolerant towards homosexuality than the PRC. However, both in Hong Kong and Taiwan it has been much easier to proclaim heterodox views in a general social discourse. For this thesis I have chosen to focus only on the PRC, precisely because of the particular social and cultural circumstances, which have changed rapidly over the past few years. I will not discuss writings with homosexual themes from Hong Kong or Taiwan, and in my thesis ‘Comrade Literature’ solely refers to the genre as it has emerged in the PRC.

Comrade Literature on the Chinese Internet also includes writings with lesbian themes, although their number is much smaller than stories on male homosexuality. For this thesis I have chosen not to include the lesbian stories, and with ‘Comrade Literature’ I therefore only refer to the genre’s male variant.

Then I would like to make some final remarks on the issue of authorship. It is safe to assume that the names of the authors of all texts discussed are in fact pseudonyms, including the ones that look like actual Chinese names. The use of pseudonyms does not solely serve to ensure anonymity to the outside world while writing about unconventional matters, but is also a custom in Internet communication. While chatting online or posting messages on a BBS, people use nicknames by which they are known within the gay community. Some authors choose to remain completely anonymous, while others provide contact information at the end of their novels. However, one can never be sure about a person’s identity on the Internet. As Giovanni Vitiello¹⁸ pointed out to me when I began work on this thesis: ‘the very type of media guarantees, even encourages, all sorts of drags. No one can tell you for sure whether behind a “gay novel” there isn’t a heterosexual Shanghai housewife.’

¹⁷ 白先勇 (Bai Xianyong): 《孽子》 (*Crystal Boys*). 香港: 華漢文化事業公司, 1988 《後記》 (*Postscript*).

¹⁸ Dr Giovanni Vitiello is currently an associate professor in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Hawaii. His research areas are traditional Chinese fiction and the history of sexuality. He is the author of several authoritative publications on homosexuality in pre-modern China.

II: DEVELOPMENT OF THE GENRE

The genre of Comrade Literature as defined in the previous chapter is not even a decade old, but thousands, if not tens of thousands of stories, long and short, have been published on the Internet under its name. As I have argued before, my goal is not to analyse the stories in order to assess the literary merits of the genre, but to give an overview of the Comrade novels that have been published over the years, and to describe the development of the genre. This is not easy, due to the interactive and transient nature of its medium – the Internet – and the large number of Comrade novels available. No one knows exactly how large the genre actually is, but ignoring its existence or arguing that it is only the marginal side-product of an invisible subculture would not be tenable.

In February 2005, a Google search in Chinese for Web pages that contain the string(s) ‘Comrade Literature’ (同志文学) and/or ‘Comrade novel(s)’ (同志小说) resulted in approximately 88,460 hits. It is often impossible to trace when the stories were first published. Many are published on several sites in the first place, or collected by other sites later on. In most cases no publication date is given. Tracing the origins of a story may also lead to wrong assumptions, for there is no guarantee that the original site of publication has not long since disappeared; this is, unfortunately, often the case. And even if there is a date of publication, we still don’t know how long the author has worked on the story before publishing it on the Internet. Taking into account the short time span in which all of these stories have been published, dates of publication would perhaps not even yield that much useful information. Therefore, giving a chronology to describe the genre’s development would not only be close to impossible, but also generate a false sense of accuracy.

However, describing the development of the genre *an sich* is not impossible, and this thesis is an attempt to do just that. Out of the approximately one hundred Comrade novels I have read, I have made a selection of fifteen, which represent different types of novels, judging by their over-all themes or (stylistic) characteristics, and demonstrate the gradual evolution of the genre. Almost all stories are collected from websites that copy Comrade novels from other sites, featuring ‘selections of fine works’ (文采 / 精选). The criteria for selection are unclear in most cases, but what the stories have in common is that they appeal to large numbers of readers. On a BBS it is quite easy to measure the popularity of a story, as the sites often show statistics for the number of readers. Selecting only popular or famous stories makes sense for this kind of study, because when tracing the development of a genre we

should take into account the interaction between the different novels, which makes stories that manage to reach a large readership inevitably more relevant. Sites that republish those popular stories may have commercial motives as well, as the sites are in most cases full of advertisements. The main criterion for my own selection has been the representational value of the stories for the different categories that I distinguish on the basis of my full reading experience in the genre. Besides, I have only selected stories that are clearly presented as fiction – there is also a large number of texts that are accounts of personal experiences, of great joy as well as great sadness. The reason why I do not include these is that they are very short (less than one page) and do not have a plot. They serve as emotional confessions and are hard to distinguish from regular posts on BBS-s.

I have arranged the fifteen stories roughly according to periods of publication, but more importantly by thematic and/or stylistic features, so as to demonstrate trends and development of the genre as a whole. In my analysis I focus on plot, theme and style of the stories. To illustrate my argument and give an impression of the actual content of the stories, I also provide partial translations. The order in which I discuss the stories as well as the subdivisions I have made are shown in the table below.

I distinguish three phases in the development of the genre, to which I refer as First, Second and Third Generation. These ‘generations’ only partially follow each other in terms of chronology, but they are clearly interrelated. Both steps, from First to Second and from Second to Third Generation, are important moments in the maturation of the genre. The different categories within each generation, as well as the different stories within each category, demonstrate simultaneous or related developments on several levels and in various forms.

Titles and authors:

Categories:

| | | | |
|---|---|--------------------------|-------------------|
| 1 | 《北京故事》 / 北京同志 著 (1996). <i>A Story from Beijing / by Beijing Comrade</i> (1996). [101 pages]* | Till Death Do Us Part... | First Generation |
| 2 | 《少年血》 / 小皓 著 (199?). <i>Wounded Youth / by Xiaohao</i> (199?). [9 pages] | | |
| 3 | 《辉子》 / 北京同志 著 (1999). <i>Huizi / by Beijing Comrade</i> (1999). [34 pages] | Happy Family? | Second Generation |
| 4 | 《吾家有弟》 / 原因 著 (2001). <i>I Have a Little Brother / by Yuanyin</i> (2001). [22 pages] | | |
| 5 | 《两男两女》 / (不详) (2000). <i>Two Men, Two Women / (Anonymous)</i> (2000). [22 pages] | | |
| 6 | 《单翼天使》 / 戴放 著 (2000). <i>Single-Winged Angels / by Dai Fang</i> (2000). [3 pages] | Tips & Tricks | |
| 7 | 《北京一夜》 / 如风 著 (1999). <i>One Night in Beijing / by Rufeng</i> (1999). [10 pages] | | |

| | | | |
|----|---|---------------------------|-------------------|
| 8 | 《紫雨之恋》 / 安瑟儿 著 (199?). <i>Purple Rain Love / by Anse'er (199?).</i> [12 pages] | Campus Life | Second Generation |
| 9 | 《若叶小子》 / Kelvin 著 (199?). <i>Boys and Leaves / by Kelvin (199?).</i> [10 pages] | | |
| 10 | 《赵小明谈恋爱》 / 小酥 著 (1999). <i>Zhao Xiaoming in Love / by Xiaosu (1999).</i> [111 pages] | | |
| 11 | 《北斗情人》 / 龙磊 著 (1999). <i>Lovers under a Starry Sky / by Longlei (1999).</i> [18 pages] | | |
| 12 | 《蝶话—梁祝的真相》 / 森森林林 著 (199?). <i>Butterfly Lovers: The Real Story of Liang and Zhu / by Sensenlinlin (199?).</i> [10 pages] | The Art of Writing | Third Generation |
| 13 | 《小文正传》 / 涂沐 (2002). <i>The Story of Little Wen / Tu Mu (2002).</i> [400 pages] | | |
| 14 | 《迷思》 / (不详) (2003). <i>The Illusive Mind / (Anonymous) (2003).</i> [59 pages] | | |
| 15 | 《双曲线•LOVE》 / 莫须有 著 (2001). <i>Hyperbolic Love / by Mo Xuyou (2001).</i> [28/250 pages] | | |

*) Printed on A4 format with 12 pt. font size and 1.5-line spacing.

First Generation:

Till Death Do Us Part...

The earliest Comrade novels tend to be improbable love stories, touching (or sentimental) at times, but invariably leading to catastrophic endings, where lovers are either separated by death or struck down by other cruel tricks of fate. Typically, an early Comrade novel will describe the difficulties that two lovers have to overcome before they can be together. These difficulties vary from story to story, but are often of a practical nature. When in the end the lovers decide to spend a lifetime together, they seem no longer bothered by harmful influences from the world around them. And that is when one of the two lovers suddenly dies.

The best example of an early Comrade novel is *A Story from Beijing*. It is the tragic love story of a poor student (Lan Yu) and a wealthy businessman (Handong). The story is told in retrospect by Handong, now living in Canada, three years after Lan Yu died. This is how it begins:

It has been three years now... Three years ago, I dreamed every night that he would come back. Astonished and wild with joy, I would ask him: 'Aren't you dead? Haven't you died?' Now, three years later, I still have the same dream very often. The difference is that now I keep telling myself it's just a dream, until I wake up.

Vancouver has such a friendly climate: no dust storms or suffocating, sticky weather like in Beijing, but always bright sunshine, accompanied by a mild breeze. Every day when I wake up at dawn, I wonder for a moment: 'Where am I?' But when I see the beautiful maple leaves outside the window, swinging in the wind, and the young woman soundly sleeping by my side – my newly wed bride – I sigh, lie down again and return to the memory in my dream...

Lan Yu comes from the countryside and attends university in Beijing. When he is short of money, his only way out is to prostitute himself. Handong happens to be his first customer and also the first person with whom he has sex. Lan Yu falls in love with Handong, who takes good care of the young student, but although Handong shows affection in a material way, he does not allow himself to get emotionally involved. He hurts Lan Yu badly by having sexual relationships with other boys as well, and nearly breaks his heart when he announces that he will get married to a lady from the office. After a lot of dramatic twists and turns, Handong finally acknowledges that he is gay and truly in love with Lan Yu. Just when they seem to have overcome all difficulties and can be together at last, Lan Yu dies in a car accident.

The story's language is not very sophisticated, it is but a medium subordinate to the story's message. The story largely consists of long dialogues and detailed, explicit accounts of lovemaking. I include a translation of the scene in which Handong and Lan Yu make love for the first time:

When we entered the room, he seemed even more nervous. He was just standing there at the door.

'Please make yourself comfortable. It's a small suite, this is the sitting room and dining room, and over there is the bedroom.'

Lan Yu was still standing at the door.

I switched on the television and handed him the remote control.

'Let's watch television. There are a lot of channels, I have cable here.' I paused, looking at him.

'If you don't want to watch, that's okay too. I won't force you to do anything. We can eat, talk, become friends,' I said, smiling.

He took the remote and looked at me for a moment, with a sad expression in his eyes.

'I... I'll watch television.'

'That's fine. I'll have a shower now, I have been busy all day,' I said, and went into the bathroom.

It was July and the weather in Beijing was hot and humid. Daytime lasts very long in summer, it was already past nine in the evening and it had only just become dark.

I was sitting alone on the sofa, wearing a bathrobe, thinking of a fast way to let this kid submit. He was in the bathroom at that moment. I called room service and ordered two glasses of booze, the kind that tastes sweet but has a strong effect, and I put an X-rated movie in the video player. When everything was ready, I couldn't help feeling a bit excited.

He came out of the bathroom, wearing loose and light blue pyjamas (I always had some brand new bathrobes and pyjamas there). His wet, uncombed hair was hanging over his forehead.

'Would you like to have a drink? Very refreshing,' I said, and handed him a glass.

He took the drink and just stood there, at a loss what to do.

'Come on, sit down.'

He sat down and seemed a little bit more at ease. On the TV-screen there was a beautiful foreign lady, all naked, licking the labia of another woman who was massaging her own breasts, moaning.

He seemed a bit startled, he just sat there without moving, holding his glass tightly with both hands. I knew it must be his first time to see an X-rated movie.

'Have you ever had a girlfriend?'

'Have you ever had a girlfriend?' I asked him again, because he didn't answer.

'No.' I could tell by his voice that he was already losing it.

I turned my head to look at him, his face was all red and he had a bemused expression. Very gently I put my hand between his legs and started to rub his crotch. His whole body seemed to freeze. His little fellow was already extremely hard.

First, I turned off the television. He glanced at me, a helpless and timid look. I took off my own bathrobe, showing him my muscular body. He couldn't take his eyes off me. I bent over and calmly undressed him. He gulped. His penis was not very big, but neither was it very small. His body was that of a not yet completely matured boy, somewhat skinny. I started to jerk him off. Then I let him lie down on the sofa. All the time I was looking in his eyes and he was looking at me too. I licked his body and gently caressed him with my hand.

'Just tell me if you don't feel comfortable.'

He looked at me, not saying a thing. I knew that you must be very kind and gentle with a virgin, that you should make their first time unforgettable so that they will do anything for you as time goes by.

Slowly I moved my mouth towards his mouth, with my tongue I licked his lips. At first, he kept his mouth very stiff, but after a little while he started to kiss me back. To be honest, I wasn't very much attracted by his body at that time, but I was very excited because he was so unspoiled, so full of youth. I think it must have been out of narcissism or self-pity, thinking about my own past. And then there was this expression in his eyes; I will never forget how he looked.

I wildly kissed him on his face and body, and with my hand I constantly fondled his penis, testicles and his butt. He seemed to get in the mood as well, he had his eyes tightly shut and was breathing heavily. All of a sudden he grasped my arm, groaned in a deep, virile voice and ejaculated. His manner seemed quite inhibited though.

I laughed, because I hadn't expected he would come that fast.

This kind of explicit sex scenes are only found in early Comrade novels and *A Story from Beijing*, being the first of its kind, was truly shocking when it appeared on the Internet in 1996. That is not merely due to the socially controversial theme of homosexuality but also because of its straightforwardness, explicit sex being the most obvious example, yet not the only one. The story of Handong and Lan Yu takes place in the late 1980s, and the student demonstrations around Tiananmen Square in June 1989 also play a role in the story. On the evening that Chinese soldiers end the demonstrations by force, Lan Yu is there with some of his fellow students. Handong, worried sick, goes looking for his young lover and finds him in the crowd, covered with the blood of another student who has got shot. Although the author does not make a political statement in this paragraph, but simply uses the event to illustrate that Handong's feelings for Lan Yu were deeper than he wanted to admit at the time, it is still an exceptionally direct reference to the army's violent action against the students.

The question is of course, why is the author so straightforward? When it comes to the sex scenes, the answer is easy: as the story seems to be written for a mainly gay readership, descriptions of homosexual lovemaking might appeal to a lot of readers; especially at a time when gay people had to hide their sexual preference and had to operate within strict confines. By writing this novel, the author intentionally wants to break through such constraints. As such, it is not surprising that the story is provocative in other respects as well and equally deals with other sensitive issues, such as the suppression of the Protest Movement on Tiananmen Square, in an unrestrained manner. Be all that as it may, *A Story from Beijing* has been a huge success ever since it was published, and many other authors have imitated its style.

Wounded Youth contains all the characteristic ingredients: two protagonists, a seemingly impossible love affair, problems that are overcome and sudden death.

The story is about a boy called Yuhao, who falls in love with Xiaohan when he is only thirteen years old. Xiaohan is eighteen, so the first problem they encounter is their age difference. Yuhao's body is not yet full-grown and therefore he cannot 'fully enjoy' all pleasures of their relationship. The physiques of both boys – in particular their private parts – and their sexual experiences together are described at length. Xiaohan applies for university, but after he has failed the entrance exams twice, he decides to join the army for three years. On their last evening together, they talk about their relationship:

'Brother Xiaohan, if only I were a girl then everything would be fine,' Yuhao suddenly said with an infatuated voice.

'I like the fact that you are a boy. It's only a pity that you haven't matured yet.' Xiaohan took Yuhao's face in his hands and kissed him again, intensely.

'It would be great if we could be together like this forever,' Yuhao said with an infatuated voice.

'Just wait till you have grown up, then we can always be together like this. Will you promise me?'

'Yes, just wait till I have grown up. Brother Xiaohan, you will wait for me, right?'

'I will wait for you. Forever.'

It is interesting to see that the problem of their age difference seems to be much more important than the fact that they are having a gay relationship. This kind of naivety, in which reality is presented in a highly idealized way, is characteristic for early Comrade novels. We

do not read about any further dilemmas, time flies and three years later the two lovers are together again. Their love is unchanged and we read how they plan to spend their life together, despite the fact that they have a homosexual relationship:

‘Brother Xiaohan, why are we like this?’ Yuhao asked, a bit worried.
‘Do you want it? Does it make you feel happy?’
‘Yes, I want it. It makes me happy.’
‘Then don’t ask why. I don’t know either, but I know that I love you and that I cannot live without you. My love for you has existed since the first time I saw you.’
‘Perhaps some things are innate, don’t you think so, brother Xiaohan?’
‘Do you remember what you promised me before?’
‘Yes...’
‘Now we can be together forever.’
‘Really, for the rest of our lives?’
‘Of course, as long we don’t change our minds.’
‘But what will other people think of it?’
‘Why should you worry about what other people think?’
‘Well, of course I do. We also have to live in the same world with them.’
‘Silly! Even if those people would try to separate us, they cannot make us stop loving each other, can they?’
‘No, you’re right...’

Although the author touches on an important matter here, *Wounded Youth* does not give readers the opportunity to see how the two lovers would actually cope with societal pressures and prejudice, or whether they would meet with any understanding from the ‘other people’. That is because their happiness is destined to end abruptly. As the author puts it:

Happiness is more often than not followed by misery. It’s just that the two lovers, who find themselves in great joy, are not aware of this fact. But when joy has come, disaster inevitably is on its way.

A *deus ex machina*, the car that prematurely ends Xiaohan’s life appears around the corner, leaving Yuhao alone in this world, inconsolable and forever faithful to the memory of his deceased true love.

The combination of an idealized world in which mainstream society’s moral standards do not interfere with the happiness of two gay lovers, and the destructive endings of the stories

inflicted by fate, forms an important leitmotiv in most early Comrade novels. The stories are primarily meant to divert; satisfying the readers by telling of the undying love between two men that would have lasted a lifetime if not for a banal accident. But there may be another reason for the use of this ‘death strategy’ by the authors. All early Comrade stories are set in China, in the late 1980s or early 1990s, and as I have discussed before, the social environment was hostile towards homosexual love. The untimely death of one of the lovers precludes the authors from having to paint a false picture of a bright and sorrow-free future that a true happy ending would have entailed, for in China in the early 1990s, such happy endings would have been absurdly unrealistic. By using this strategy, authors recoiled from really engaging with the issue of social disapproval towards homosexuality – a painful reality that most of the readers would have to deal with in daily life.

This lack of realism in both plot and theme of early Comrade novels also helps to explain their hyper-realistic language, as a compensatory mechanism. Distracting attention from a serious social issue, such as gay discrimination, is achieved by writing in great detail about the more pleasurable aspects of gay love, such as lovemaking. The bravery of the early stories’ straightforwardness that paved the way for the genre of Comrade Literature at the same time served to hide its weakness in thematic realism. Yet it seems that the strategy worked well: *A Story from Beijing* has been extremely popular among readers ever since it was published, while most readers do not value the story specially because of its abundant erotic scenes, but rather for its emotional impact.

With the earliest stories published, Comrade Literature as a genre on the Internet was a fact and started to develop rapidly. The second generation of Comrade novels differs from the earliest stories in a fundamental way. As we will see, social acceptance of homosexuality becomes an important theme and explicit sex disappears altogether. This affirms the supposition that the ‘shocking straightforwardness’ found in early Comrade novels was merely a consequence of their deficiency in thematic realism.

Second Generation:

Happy Family?

The development that is most characteristic for second-generation Comrade novels is the increase in thematic diversity. While plots remain simple and no special efforts are made by the authors to produce poetical texts, stories increasingly attempt to give insights into the characters' lives and thoughts. Instead of presenting an idealized love story, characters in second-generation Comrade novels encounter problems or dilemmas that gay readers are faced with in daily life and with which they can identify.

As discussed before, traditional thinking about marriage and posterity is the main obstacle keeping Chinese gay people from expressing their sexual preference. Not surprisingly, marriage becomes an important theme in many of the second-generation Comrade novels. The stories focus on the difficult choice that characters have to make between living up to social expectations and pursuing personal happiness. The transition from love stories such as *A Story from Beijing* into more realistic stories in which characters struggle with their homosexual feelings becomes clear in *Huizi*, also written by 'Beijing Comrade'. Although one can never be sure about the identity of authors on the Internet, Chinese readers of Comrade novels generally assume that *Huizi* is indeed written by the same author as *A Story from Beijing*, judging on stylistic features.

Huizi is the story of two boys, Xiaoyang and Huizi, who grow up together in an old quarter of downtown Beijing. Although Huizi is only seven months older, he is pretty much like a big brother to Xiaoyang. They are both very promising students in middle school, until one day Huizi gets involved in a group fight where someone is killed. Huizi is sentenced to spend two and a half years in a re-education labour camp and there is no hope that he will ever go back to school with such a record. When he comes out, he starts working while Xiaoyang is preparing for his university entrance exams. In this period Xiaoyang discovers that he is in love with Huizi. Although they do not directly discuss their feelings, it becomes clear that Xiaoyang's love is not returned. He feels sad and confused about his homosexual feelings, applies for a university in faraway Shanghai, and is admitted. After his farewell to Huizi and before leaving Beijing, Xiaoyang is troubled by mixed feelings:

When I came home, my parents and my brother weren't there. I lay down on my bed and closed my eyes. All the time I was thinking of Huizi, I could see his eyes and eyebrows, his nose, his

lips, his smile and white teeth, his neck, his broad shoulders and strong arms, the tiny beads of sweat on his body, and I could smell his scent...

I started to caress my body, and imagined that these were Huizi's hands I felt. Slowly my hand moved down, rousing my own desire. I whispered his name and felt my body become weighty, as if he lay down on top of me. I gazed at him in joy and with my hand I stroked his handsome face.

'Xiaoyang, do you want it?' I could hear him ask, tenderly. I vigorously nodded yes. Huizi held me tightly and kissed my skin, and I gave way to my desire. It was very quiet in my room, only the cicadas in the trees outside the window were screeching relentlessly. But Huizi wasn't there; these weren't his hands, his lips, and his caresses. There was just me, with a handful of sticky bodily fluid.

I got up to wipe off my own sperm. I kept wiping my hand with toilet paper but it didn't get clean, tiny pieces of paper stuck to my hand. I wiped harder! And harder... I went out into the yard and walked up to the pump, turned on the water, bent over and put my head under the water gushing out. Ah! That felt nice. The ice-cold clear water slowly washed away the dry heat of summer. The more water had poured out, the colder it became and the nice feeling gradually turned into a sensation of pain. I stood there so long that the water by that time must have come from two thousand metres below the city of Beijing, but I didn't want it to stop. I needed this pain. I wanted to wash away thoroughly the stickiness on my hand, the tears on my face and the filthy thoughts on my mind...

Cooled down by the water I started my life as a university student. I was so naïve as to think that I had washed away my love for Huizi and my desire for boys under that tormenting stream. But the water of Beijing turned out to be unreliable... I had heard people talk before about the soft water in Beijing. And indeed! Even the groundwater didn't have any strength at all.

During his first holiday, Xiaoyang goes back to Beijing to see his family and Huizi. He discovers that Huizi is having a relationship with Xiaowei, another boy. Although he still feels hurt about being rejected, Xiaoyang now realises that Huizi wanted to protect him from becoming just like himself: an outcast. Huizi's criminal record has destroyed any hopes of a bright future, and Huizi's parents take his being gay as yet another sign that their son has gone astray, already beyond redemption. Because he is so fond of Xiaoyang, Huizi does not want to serve as a bad role model. In the years that follow, Huizi and Xiaoyang see each other only occasionally.

While attending university in Shanghai, Xiaoyang is struggling with his homosexual feelings. He has decided to suppress these feelings, which he considers unhealthy, and keep going straight, as Huizi wants him to. Now and then he tries to get along with girls, but the relationships do not last very long. Sometimes he yields to temptation and has sex with anonymous gay men in shabby places, after which he feels guilty and dirty. For Xiaoyang, the

safest way to spend his days is to study hard and not leave any room for ‘unhealthy’ thoughts. This struggle is the main theme in *Huizi*. It is a difficult process, involving contradictory emotions, but he perseveres. As the author describes Xiaoyang’s state of mind:

I wanted to overcome my mental weakness, and get rid of those immoral, ridiculous thoughts. When I looked in the mirror back then, all sorts of feelings would come up: sadness for being different from other people, pity for feeling so alone, helplessness because there was no other choice than to seek solitude, and pride for being brave enough to make that choice.

In the end, Xiaoyang finds a girl with whom he gets engaged. After graduating, they go to Beijing to get married. Of course Huizi attends the wedding and he wishes the couple all the best. When they are alone, Xiaoyang asks about Huizi’s plans. Huizi says that in spite of his parents’ desire to see him married, he has decided to spend his life with Xiaowei.

Xiaoyang and his wife move to a small town near the sea. Before long a son is born and they spend their days as what seems to be a happy family. When Xiaoyang receives a letter from his parents in which they write that Huizi has been sent back to prison, he goes to Beijing to see what has happened. He finds out that Huizi was arrested for ‘indecent behaviour’, that is for having a relationship with a man. As one of his friends explains, this kind of offence normally does not lead to any punitive measures, but because Huizi had a record and had been sentenced before, any kind of offence would have been enough reason to send him back to prison. Xiaoyang goes to see Huizi and promises to look out for Xiaowei, because Xiaowei doesn’t know his boyfriend’s whereabouts. Xiaoyang finds Xiaowei and helps the two lovers to re-establish contact. Furthermore, he urges Huizi’s sisters to support their brother in his choice to spend his life together with a man, once he is free again.

After doing everything he can to ensure a happy life for the person he loves most, Xiaoyang returns to his wife and son. The story ends in the bridal room, where Xiaoyang is looking at a golden ring which has the character for ‘happiness’ engraved in it – a present from Huizi for his wedding. The question that remains unanswered at the end of the story is whether or not Xiaoyang has actually found happiness by suppressing his feelings for Huizi – or in general: for men – and living a respectable life according to social standards. What does become clear, is that Xiaoyang has made a rational choice rather than give in to emotions or desire, and that social expectations have been his main consideration to do so. At the end of the story we don’t know either whether Huizi and his lover Xiaowei will indeed live happily

ever after. At least there seems to be hope for them, but only after Huizi has accepted the fact that he will never become a respectable citizen again anyhow.

Huizi is one of the first stories in which the dilemma of personal happiness versus social expectations forms an important theme. We see how Huizi and Xiaoyang have different motives for their choices: Huizi has already been labelled 'outcast', and even suppressing his homosexual feelings would not help to clear his reputation. Interestingly, Xiaoyang's primary motive to get married is not his sense of social duty, but because the man he loves wants him to.

Yet there are also stories in which characters do make a decision for social reasons: for example out of consideration for their parents. *I Have a Little Brother* is the story about the twin brothers Zhou Chi and Zhou Xun. When the story begins, the elder brother Zhou Chi is on his way from Shenzhen, where he works and lives, back to Beijing to spend Chinese New Year together with his family. He makes a stopover in Shanghai for a rendezvous with a boy he has met on the Internet. He had hoped to find love, but comes to the conclusion that this boy is not his type. From his reflections it becomes clear that he has chosen to live so far away from his hometown Beijing to hide his homosexual lifestyle from his parents and his younger brother.

Back in Beijing he is confronted with his mother, who is anxious to see her two sons married and have children. She is not in good health, and their father thinks it is because she worries too much about her sons not having a girlfriend yet while they have almost reached the age of thirty. When Zhou Chi and Zhou Xun are together and talk about this matter, they both urge the other to find a girlfriend and have a family, but both brothers seem reluctant to do so first. Zhou Xun still lives in Beijing. He says that he has a lot of girlfriends all the time, but does not feel ready for a serious relationship. Because he is tired of his mother nagging all the time, he often stays out at his friend Xiao Li's place. Zhou Chi on the other hand says that he prefers his life as a bachelor. Actually he has had a boyfriend for some time in Shenzhen, and he was originally planning to tell his brother about it. But because the relationship has ended, he decides not to mention it after all.

When the New Year has come, Zhou Xun goes back to Xiao Li's apartment while Zhou Chi stays some more days at his parents' place. He starts wondering about his brother living together with Xiao Li, and comes to the conclusion that they might be lovers. His suspicions are confirmed when he discovers nude pictures of Xiao Li on his brother's laptop which he has borrowed for some days. The next day, Zhou Xun gives him a call and says that

he has something important to tell him. Zhou Chi guesses that his brother wants to tell him about his relationship with Xiao Li.

However, before the brothers have a chance to talk, their mother's headaches become unbearable and she is brought to hospital. It turns out that she has a tumour in her head that has to be removed immediately. Fortunately the operation goes well, and before long she starts to recover. Her husband and her two sons take good care of her and she assures them that she is not planning to pass away before she has seen her two sons married and have children. Zhou Chi notices that his brother's attitude towards Xiao Li has suddenly become very indifferent, and he even mentions a girlfriend whom he will introduce to them in the days to come. Zhou Chi is puzzled by this sudden change in his brother's behaviour. A week later he returns to Shenzhen.

After some days, Zhou Chi receives a call from his former boyfriend, Yuguo, who asks if he can drop by. Zhou Chi finds that he still has strong feelings for his ex-lover, especially after his disappointing date in Shanghai. Yuguo feels the same way and they make love once more. Yuguo confesses that he missed Zhou Chi badly, and he is glad that he called Zhou Chi two weeks earlier to tell him that his feelings of love had never gone away. Zhou Chi can't remember receiving such a call and when he asks Yuguo the exact day, he realises that it must have been his twin brother Zhou Xun who answered his mobile phone at his parents' place, while he himself was with his mother in the hospital. Zhou Chi now understands his brother's sudden change: Zhou Xun had found out about his brother being gay as well, and for the sake of their mother's peace of mind he had decided not to see Xiao Li anymore and find a girl to get married with. Zhou Chi is moved by his brother's sacrifice and tells Yuguo that they cannot stay together because he has to get married.

One Chinese virtue that plays a key role in this story is filial piety (孝顺), according to which children must take care of their parents and show consideration by obeying their wishes in order to ensure their happiness. Up until the present day, filial piety is a factor that keeps Chinese gay people from expressing their sexual identity, as such behaviour evidently conflicts with the hopes and expectations of average Chinese parents, especially when it comes to the issue of posterity. That is why the end of *I Have a Little Brother* is hardly an encouragement to Chinese gay readers while it does make the story realistic and credible. Filial piety is made explicit, when the mother of the twins is in hospital:

In the days that followed, the two sons and their father took turns so that there was always one of them with mother. Although they were busy all the time, the family members felt very close.

Other patients who shared the same hospital room started to praise Zhou Chi and Zhou Xun for coming all the time. They said that their parents were lucky to have such filial sons.

One afternoon, not long before his mother was to return home, Zhou Chi was keeping her company in the hospital when an old lady, who had been staying in the hospital for a long time, came to have a chat with her. The old lady started by saying that his mother was lucky to have someone around all the time, instead of being lonely like herself, always looking for company. Then she said: 'One won't find any filial children next to the hospital bed of someone who's been ill for a long time... I've been here for a few months now, and my own children don't take the effort to come over and visit me anymore.'

Zhou Chi noticed that her teeth were still healthy and he offered the old lady the apple he had just finished peeling. She accepted the apple, after first declining modestly, and said: 'Just look what a handsome son you have! Is this the older or the younger one? They both look better than those singers you see on television! Gosh, when I just came here there was a lot of consternation... There were reporters and managers of record companies all over the place, because this singer, Mao Ning, got stabbed!'¹⁹

Zhou Chi's mother said: 'Doesn't everybody say he's a faggot [二椅子]? In what kind of world do we live, where such habits from feudal times do revive? Sometimes I think: I have two sons and both are still single, but at least they behave decently and don't break any laws. They both have good jobs and show so much filial piety, I really should praise my luck!'

Zhou Chi was peeling an apple and his hands paused for a moment, but then he continued...

Other stories also fail to offer a real solution for the apparent lack of filial piety by expressing one's homosexuality, but in some stories the characters find ingenious ways to assuage their parents' worries and at the same time pursue a degree of personal happiness. In *Two Men, Two Women*, the characters opt for a radical remedy: fake marriage. But the execution of their plan brings new problems, which lead to an unforeseen ending.

The story is about two gay men in Nanjing, Wang Kechun and Zhang Limin, who have been together for more than three years, but decide to marry because of social pressure by family and colleagues. They place an advertisement on the Internet and get into contact with a lesbian couple: Zhang Chulei and Xu Jing. After talking over the practical aspects of fake marriage, Wang Kechun marries Zhang Chulei, and Zhang Limin marries Xu Jing. To keep up appearances, the 'couples' live together and go to social outings together, but in the evenings they usually swap back so that everybody can be together with his or her real lover.

The plot of the story is simple, although the chronology is not linear: in flashbacks we read how Kechun and Limin got to know each other. At the time when the story begins

¹⁹ This refers to a real incident in Beijing on 22 November 2000, when pop singer Mao Ning (毛宁) was hospitalised after he got stabbed by a male prostitute. The case got much attention in official Chinese media as well as in online discussion forums.

however, the four characters have already been married for three months and Kechun starts to realise that perhaps his relationship with Limin is drawing to an end. He notices that when they are together, Limin spends more and more time behind the computer. Kechun finds out that his boyfriend is chatting online with the same person every night. This person uses the nickname 'White Rabbit', and when Limin is not there Kechun discovers a log of their last chat session, in which Limin confesses that he is in love with White Rabbit. Kechun is upset and goes to a bar where he starts drinking alone, until a stranger sits down next to him, who turns out to be a psychologist – and gay. They talk about love and love-sickness. They end up in a hotel room where this stranger has arranged an erotic gathering, and Kechun betrays Limin in his broken-hearted mood.

When Kechun comes home the next day, he finds a note left by Chulei, which says that Xu Jing is pregnant. When he arrives at Limin and Xu Jing's place, he learns that his own boyfriend is the father and that Xu Jing is not planning to get rid of the baby in her womb. She is the 'White Rabbit' with whom Limin has been chatting lately. She wants to stay together with Limin and live a genuine family life. The whole situation especially infuriates Chulei, who thinks that her girlfriend is just talking gibberish because of the hormonal changes in her body after yielding to male domination, but Xu Jing convinces her that she has made up her mind and that she is no longer in love with Chulei. Limin's attitude in the matter is rather phlegmatic: he cannot deny that he is still in love with his boyfriend, but then again he does not want to give up his present family life for the sake of appearances. Chulei runs off to a bar to drink down her rage and sadness, and Kechun joins her. When they get home dead drunk, Chulei proposes to take revenge and she makes love with Kechun. They divorce a month later after Kechun has turned out to be sterile. Then Kechun decides it is time for him to leave Nanjing. Limin comes by one more time and begs him to stay, but Kechun rejects him because Limin is not brave enough to bear the consequences of his love for him and give up Xu Jing. Once again a dramatic ending that leaves the reader with mixed feelings.

Obviously, these stories are about making decisions. The characters find themselves in situations where they have to choose between ignoring their homosexual feelings and adapt to social rule, or to give in to those feelings, at the risk of being rejected by society. Most Chinese gay readers have to deal with this struggle between the heart and the mind in their personal lives, judging from the many discussions on this topic on Chinese gay websites. Reading stories that tackle the issue might help them to contemplate their opinions, and to see possible consequences without having to live through them first. But as in any dilemma,

neither of the two options will lead to a completely satisfactory outcome. This is reflected in the stories, which are less than decisive in their conclusions.

As I have mentioned before, second generation Comrade novels try to tune in on their gay readership, presenting characters and situations with which gay readers can identify. So far I have only discussed the internal struggle that is caused by social factors and clearly appeals to a lot of readers, but there is more to it. Many of the stories also contain elements that can be described as ‘an exploration of the gay world’, which may be presented as reflections on love in general or gay love in particular, descriptions of how gay people behave when they are amongst themselves or stories that contain unwritten rules of conduct and survival strategies. This type of self-reflection on gay life by gay authors is in fact the main theme of some Comrade novels, which I shall discuss next.

However, such self-reflection can also be found in numerous other stories. *Two Men, Two Women* for example contains an elaborate analysis of the gay psyche. When Kechun has found out about Limin’s amorous chat sessions and is drinking away his grief in a bar, the psychologist who keeps him company guesses the nature of his sorrows and gives him a lecture on the gay psyche that gradually turns into an ardent plea by the author for gay emancipation:

‘Why are you drinking alone? Are you lovesick? People often drink when they are lovesick. Because they feel hurt. But in the meantime, the person who caused you pain is probably having a good time. So why the fuss?’

‘It is always the same: he says he loves you, but he never lets you feel it through his actions. Sometimes he doesn’t even care to say he loves you. But when you decide to leave him, he says that he needs you and begs you to stay. Then you give him another chance. And when this has happened a few times, you’ll find that your relationship isn’t really much anymore, but yet you are reluctant to let it end altogether. After all, you wanted to find someone to spend the rest of your life with and that is what he wants as well, but you have the feeling that you have to pay too high a price for it. You start wondering whether he is worthy of your love. But then he suddenly smiles at you, gives you a hug and says that he is so in love with you, and you will instantly forget all that. Even if all the lights in the world went dark, his sparkling smile would be enough for you to hold on to.’

‘Do you know how I figured out about you feeling that the price you have to pay might be too high? First of all your haircut and clothes are very trendy, so you seem to be outgoing. You like to wear greenish colours, which means that you are sensitive and easily upset. The impression that you give me is of someone who is well educated, but from your manners I can tell that you haven’t just graduated, I would say that you have already been working for more than three years. Because of your boyish face you only look like 21 or 22 years old, and so your mental

age surpasses your physical age. Therefore I assume that when it comes to relationships, you prefer to fulfil the role of a little brother, hoping that there is a big brother who can dote on you and love you. Within the gay scene, someone with this role will certainly encounter much hardship. You probably think that you are the only one suffering in this way, but actually you are just a newcomer in the crowd of people that cry in the depth of night.

‘Guys like you are often attracted to mannish men, both in appearance and behaviour. Preferably a taciturn type with a firm character, who is quick-tempered and stubborn but has a sense of responsibility. However, there are not many guys like that in the scene. You know, people like us are similar in some ways. When it comes to physique, we often have a good skin and like to wear green. On the mental level we tend to be sensitive and easily upset. Oh, and smart. A lot of singers and actors are like us. We are narcissistic, sentimental and susceptible. Because we unconsciously accustom to or hide from social pressure all the time, we are precocious when it comes to emotions, but on a more worldly level we mature late. Because of this, together with endocrine factors, many of us look younger than their actual age.

‘Now when it comes to the type of guy that you like, having a strong sense of social responsibility, or rather a strong need to feel accepted by society, they are above all the ones who get married. That is one reason why you are sad. The other reason is that they are emotionally often not refined enough to sense things in the same subtle way as you do, or if they can, they are not used to expressing their feelings. And because you feel attracted to that kind of guy, you will inevitably encounter sadness.

‘Actually, homosexuality is a very natural phenomenon. In a lifetime, one has a chance of 70% of having a homosexual experience. Then there is 10% of the population that actually *is* gay. This means that China has 120,000,000 gay people! If you go and stand on the street for some time, then every one out of ten people that walk by is gay. But of course as a result of social factors, some people might never even dare to think about it. There are also people who are clear about their identity from the very beginning. In the animal world homosexuality exists as well. And in some other countries, homosexuality is not even seen as a mental disease. Once there was a Chinese doctor who spent ten years of his life finding a way to cure homosexuality, but then gave up. Ten years! He just wasted ten precious years of his life. Homosexuality cannot be cured, because it is innate. To accept it is all you can do. It would be much better if people tried to accept their own homosexual feelings rather than suppressing them.

‘Homosexual behaviour also makes sense in a logical way. It focuses on the secondary sexual characteristics, and because lovers share the same gender, they are able to understand the other as they understand themselves, which is what makes it work. And although there are people who say that often changing sex partners is an unethical thing to do, in the animal world it is in fact the most effective way to maintain and enhance the condition of the species. For example, we have the saying: “making love with one’s wife is less exciting than making love with a concubine, with a concubine is less exciting than with someone else’s wife, and even with her it is not as exciting as with the one you cannot get”. This mental attitude is clearly founded on animal impulse.

‘Men are born hunters. In places where gay people go and meet each other, they play hide and seek. It’s that feeling which is most exciting...’

A lot of other second-generation Comrade novels contain such theories on how the ‘gay mind’ works as well, but few are as elaborate as the above example. However, so far none of the authors has tried to let their characters use this kind of rhetoric to persuade family members into acceptance of their homosexuality, which perhaps indicates that authors themselves do not have high hopes of speedy gay emancipation.

Tips & Tricks

A reader might wonder when reading a story what message the author wants to deliver, or even whether there *is* a message. As we have seen in most of the stories discussed earlier, authors are cautious in passing judgement on how to act under certain circumstances and try not to create the impression that they know the answer to problems confronting their characters. Yet sometimes it seems as if we can hear the author speaking through his characters, giving voice to feelings commonly shared by Chinese gay people, often expressions of disappointment or frustration about the lack of understanding shown towards homosexuality by mainstream society. In recent stories, these sentiments gradually turn into a charge aimed at orthodox thinking. But in most cases where we can hear the author's voice, he (or she) merely wants to share his opinion or knowledge with his gay readership. The above passage from *Two Men, Two Women* is a fine example of the author taking the floor to present his own vision on homosexuality. The argumentation fills nearly three of a total of twenty-two pages, while it has little to do with the story's plot. The author's plea for self-awareness and self-confidence on the part of gay people is not carried through into the ultimate actions of at least two characters, and the story's topic – fake marriage – embodies a conformity to traditional demands rather than the quest for gay emancipation.

But even though the indirect message of the story might be that a change in attitude is difficult to accomplish, and requires both courage and time, the author at least conveys his personal opinion on how homosexuality *should* be viewed, in the first place by gay people and, beyond that, by society at large. It is safe to assume that gay readers will agree with him. The author also attempts to analyse the 'gay psyche' and 'gay behaviour'. Although the validity of a concept like 'gay psyche' might be questionable in itself, it is one of these issues on which every self-proclaimed expert feels free to comment. Because in most cases such analyses tend to have stereotype outcomes, they form another useful tool for authors of Comrade novels to create a sense of familiarity in their readers, as they can likely identify with many of the situations and issues described.

In some stories, the plot is completely subordinate to the vision that the author wants to expose, and solely serves as a background against which the author can unfold his ideas or give a personally coloured impression. Typically, such stories are short, as the plot does not contain any developments that do not directly relate to the main subject. In most cases, that subject is either homosexual love or the gay scene. I shall give an example of both.

Single-Winged Angels is the shortest of all selected stories and has a minimalist plot. The story is about two flatmates who are both gay and looking for love, but have different ideas on how to achieve their goal. Meng Feiyang announces every week that he has found the love of his life, but his romances always turn out to be short-lived. His flatmate Fang Ruoyu thinks that Meng's conception of love is too superficial, and that acting on impulse will never help him to find a serious partner. According to Fang, one should carefully select a suitable person before rushing into a relationship. However, his strategy has not helped him to find a partner either. Then all of a sudden Meng's behaviour changes: he becomes serious and no longer goes out on dates. In the end he tells Fang that he will go to Shanghai where he has found a new job. The actual reason why Meng has decided to leave surprises Fang: to be together with the man he loves. He says he now realises that Fang is right, that real love is worth making efforts and taking responsibility, that two people must take time to get to know each other and that love has more to do with subtleties than with outward appearances. However, half a year after their goodbye, Meng returns broken-hearted because his boyfriend has gone abroad. In the meantime, Fang has followed Meng's advice and he has had a short but passionate relationship with an absolute stranger. He admits that Meng was right and that the 'passionate flame' is perhaps the ultimate feeling that defines love, although the unfortunate course of his romance has now left him with a bad hang-over. Together, they come to the conclusion that in a successful relationship reason and emotion should go hand in hand, and that love should be the coming together of reality and imagination. To express that situation, they use a metaphor of a single-winged angel who lacks either his wing of reason / reality or emotion / imagination and therefore cannot fly. But the story ends with a dream in which both Meng and Fang imagine being single-winged angels, who can fly together when they embrace.

The story is an exposé on how a successful relationship should be constituted, and the author uses two different characters, a simple plot and a metaphor to illustrate his idea. In this case it is obvious that the author wanted to deliver a message and it seems likely that the story was constructed only for that reason. For other stories, which often have a more complicated plot and are aesthetically more ambitious, it is harder to answer the question if there is a message.

Although this question touches on the broader issue whether or not it is legitimate to analyse literature and art in general in terms such as 'reason' and 'message', I think it is helpful for understanding the development of Comrade Literature if we assume that these stories are written with a certain intention (e.g. addressing fellow gay men) and that authors

have purposely chosen certain themes, by referring to an extra-textual reality that is shared by the author and his readership (i.e. the experiences of Chinese gay people in real life). As I have said earlier, stories of the second generation are more realistic in a sense that readers can easily identify with characters or descriptions in the story, and the use of stereotypes is one way to achieve such realism. It is interesting to note that Comrade novels which are considered to be realistic are often the most popular stories among readers, as can be seen from reading statistics and the spread of novels that are available online. It would be jumping to conclusions to say that authors of Comrade novels therefore ‘utilize’ easily recognizable elements in order to let their stories gain popularity, but taking into account that authors themselves are readers as well, writing stories that contain such elements could be seen as an obvious and natural consequence.

One Night in Beijing is a good example of a story in which the author has incorporated his personal knowledge of the Chinese gay scene. The story begins with an interesting announcement: This story is entirely fictional; any resemblance with real matters is due to coincidence! What follows is the account of a one-night stand that is so stereotype that a lot of Chinese gay readers with a similar experience will certainly find it familiar. The story also contains statements that reflect feelings which might be shared by Chinese gay readers, as we have seen before. But moreover, the author abundantly uses ‘gay jargon’ and refers to matters that are considered common knowledge or common practice within the Chinese gay scene. As much of these references might be more obscure to outsiders or lay persons, I shall elaborate on these in my analysis of this story.

One Night in Beijing is the account of a businessman who is sent to Beijing for some days by his company to settle an affair with a customer. The protagonist (we do not learn his name) stayed in Beijing before, while attending university, but he is very excited about this particular trip as he has only recently found out that Beijing is the ‘gay capital of China’. He got this information from the Internet, where he has discovered a whole new world. As our hero puts it:

Compared to the crew-cut boy who dashed into Beijing several years ago, I had now changed considerably. Particularly after discovering the Internet, which has helped me to become clear about my homosexuality and gather experience with gay lifestyle, of which I used to be absolutely ignorant.

The significance of this remark lies in the fact that shared experiences on the Internet, put into stories or presented in other ways, form an important source of reference on the Chinese gay scene and gay lifestyle, from which people who are discovering their homosexuality can derive useful information. This guidebook-function of the online gay discourse is an important feature of the gay scene in the PRC.

Once in Beijing, our hero decides to go to a famous gay spot, the Dongdan Park (东单公园). The author describes that this park has since long been used by gay people in Beijing as a meeting place, or ‘fishing ground’ (渔场) as it is called in gay jargon. Our hero sits down on a bench near a kiosk in the park, which he knows is the main gathering place, and while reading a newspaper he observes the men who walk by. The author describes this process of watching and being watched by citing a famous poem:

You take in the view from the bridge,
and the sightseer watches you from the balcony.

The gracious moon adorns your window,
and you adorn another’s dream.²⁰

Before long, our hero locates a suitable ‘prey’ (猎物): a young boy who is called Xiaowei. Subsequently we can read the whole process of getting acquainted and the steps that eventually lead to a one-night stand. As this part of the story contains much information on particular aspects of gay lifestyle in China, and at the same time forms a stereotype account of social intercourse within the Chinese gay scene, I shall give a translation of the entire passage:

Xiaowei seemed to know the Dongdan Park quite well. As he walked by, he thoroughly observed the men that were gathered around the newspaper kiosk but his mood sank. Then, when he looked aside, his glance accidentally crossed mine, and his gloomy eyes regained their glint. According to what I had read on the Internet, this was a sign that I had given him a favourable impression and that it shouldn’t be much of a problem to ‘hook’ [钩] him. So I gave him a wanton look and kept staring at him. He was the type of boy that I liked, and besides I wanted to experience what it would take to ‘hook’ a guy, so I hinted with my eyes that he should sit down next to me.

²⁰ The title of this poem is ‘Fragment’ (《断章》) and was written by the well-known contemporary poet Bian Zhilin (卞之琳) in 1935. This is the translation by the author, as published in *Contemporary Chinese Poetry*, by Robert Payne (trans., ed.). London: Routledge, 1947 (p. 86).

He lingered for a moment but then he walked over and sat down. I smiled friendly at him, and decided that it would be best to behave in a mature and experienced manner towards this little fledgling. I asked him: 'Do you come here often?'

'No,' he muttered after while and with a blushing face.

Actually I had to laugh but I wanted to maintain my mature air, so I continued by asking: 'Are you looking for someone?'

Xiaowei hesitated for a moment and then nodded yes.

Then it was his turn to ask me: 'Do you surf the Internet?'²¹ I was startled and didn't know why he would ask me that. Perhaps he was an Internet-freak as well... At first I wanted to tell him the truth, but then I changed my mind and decided to lie about it. If I would let him talk, then I would perhaps get a more truthful impression of how other people looked upon the Internet. I shook my head: 'Not yet, why do you ask?'

Xiaowei was a bit disappointed. 'You look like someone who has access to the Internet. In that way we would have something to talk about!' I smiled and said: 'We could still talk about it, because I do know something about Internet. Isn't it true that there are quite some websites for people like us?'

Perhaps it was because I touched upon his specialty, which immediately caused Xiaowei to become enthusiastic: 'Sure! The Internet is unrestrained. Anybody can freely publish anything on the Web. People like us don't have the courage to reveal our homosexuality in daily life, so the Internet is the ideal playground for us. There are now numerous gay websites, like Red Dust, Butterflyer, Boysky and so on.'²² If you have a chance, you should really take a look and you'll find that what you see beats the imagination. It is really a shame that you haven't surfed the Internet.' Now he was lecturing me. I laughed in my sleeve, because I realised that if he was a frequent visitor of Red Dust, we might very well have talked before in the chat room. I couldn't help thinking that it was a small world full of coincidence. But I had already lied to him and now I should carry on with it, also because many years of experience had taught me not to tell everything about myself to strangers.

'I have also heard something about chat rooms on the Internet, where strangers meet and talk to each other by typing words, and that there are men and women who fall in love through the Internet and sometimes even get married!' 'Yes, indeed. Like the chat room on Red Dust, which is really good. Some gay people find a BF [=boyfriend] there.' 'So why don't you look for one in there?' I didn't wait for him to finish his story because I was really interested in his answer.

'When I am online, it is mostly on campus, so I don't have much opportunity to visit those chat rooms.' Only then did I realise that he must be a university student, which I could also have guessed from his way of talking and from his clothes. 'Judging by your accent, you seem to be from the South. Are you studying all alone in Beijing?'

²¹ This question is often used literally among Chinese gay people to establish whether or not the person with whom you are talking is indeed gay. Of course the outcome depends on the (gay) websites one does or does not know.

²² Red Dust: 花醉红尘, <http://www.touchv.com>

Butterflyer: 化蝶, <http://butterflyer.yeah.net> (may no longer be accessible)

Boysky: 阳光地带, <http://www.boysky.com>

‘I am from Jiangxi Province and I am studying in Beijing. I am in my second year now. Where are you from?’ Of course I had expected his answer, but yet I was startled to learn that we were actually from the same place! Although it would normally leave me cold, it now struck me that I had just picked out someone in a park, who then happened to be from the same place as me. I felt a bit awkward. Fortunately I speak without any accent so he wouldn’t easily find out about me, and I asked him: ‘Where do you guess I come from?’ ‘You sound like someone from the North!’ I felt hesitant to give a straightforward answer, so I said: ‘Let’s say that you are partially right. By the way, did you ever have a date with someone you met through the Internet?’

‘Of course, but although the Internet population is quite diverse, the people you meet are picky. And having a date is often troublesome as the mutual expectations are very high. I have met up with several people and it has left me a bit disappointed, because if I happened to like the other person then he wouldn’t like me, or it would be the other way around. So I got fed up and then decided to try my luck here. You know, it is very difficult in China for a gay person to meet someone you like.’ I hadn’t expected that this unspoiled boy would be so experienced.

Our mood saddened in that moment. We had the same feeling, and with lowered heads we thought about our pasts. I wanted to break the silence, so I joked: ‘And what about me, am I the kind of guy you are looking for?’ His answer was very frank: ‘You are nice, otherwise I wouldn’t have come over to talk with you!’ My heart jumped, because I had liked him from the beginning and I wouldn’t mind having a one-night stand with him. I tried: ‘Do you have any plans for tonight? I am in Beijing all by myself on a business trip, we could have some fun together?’ I had no idea if I was rushing things, and as soon as I had finished my sentence, my face went red.

Luckily he didn’t notice and just nodded vigorously. I felt amused, because I didn’t think that there would be people who were even more anxious than me.

The two decide to continue their conversation elsewhere and leave for the Butterfly Bar, which is one of Beijing’s renowned gay bars.²³ Because our hero would be interested to spend the night together with Xiaowei, he asks the boy if he is a 1 or a 0, which in gay jargon respectively stands for someone who prefers to fulfil a sexually active or passive role.²⁴ When Xiaowei declares that he has not enough sexual experience to decide on the matter but then again would not mind to find out, our hero tries to explore how Xiaowei looks upon one-night stands. Once again, the author uses a widespread gay jargon for one-night stand, namely ‘419’, to be pronounced as ‘sìyāojiǔ’, but in English (‘four-one-nine’) almost homonym to ‘for-one-night’.²⁵ It turns out that Xiaowei is not adverse to one-night stands:

²³ The Butterfly Bar (蝴蝶吧) is situated at Beijing’s famous ‘Bar Street’ in the Sanlitun Area (三里屯酒吧街).

²⁴ Also referred to with the English words ‘top/bottom’. See also the next note.

²⁵ This kind of code language was first used on the Chinese Internet, as national guidelines prohibit explicitly sexual language in chat rooms, but some codes have also become common expressions in spoken language.

'I know there are many people who say that one-night stands are wrong or dangerous, but I don't think so. People have a lot of different ways to communicate, and perhaps one night can really help someone to understand the other person in a better way.' The beer had comforted Xiaowei, and he now spoke very eloquently. 'If I only liked the other person and felt that he liked me as well then I would give it a try. To like someone can sometimes also be a kind of love. From that perspective, a one-night stand is not something that doesn't involve emotions.'

I didn't know how to answer, but I admired him for the fact that he had such independent thoughts on the matter.

'In my opinion, the contact could intensify after one night, but it could also be that the next day both persons will go their own ways again. However, I think it doesn't really matter, as long as one has got the taste of love.' I really wasn't sure whether he would agree with me, but after having had several romances, I could no longer believe in everlasting love.

He replied: 'I still hope that two persons can continue to be friends, even if they don't succeed in being lovers. Why couldn't people be friends after having slept together? Even divorced men and women can manage to be friends afterwards, so why couldn't we? After all, having a one-night stand with someone means that you have at least found someone you like.'

Our hero is touched by Xiaowei's sincerity and confesses that he has lied to him about surfing the Internet and also has concealed the fact that the two of them are from the same place. These revelations intensify their feelings of intimacy, and before long the two are heading for a hotel where they ultimately spend the night together. The next morning our hero has to run off to an appointment with his customer and after that he has to catch his train back to his hometown. Just before the train departs, Xiaowei calls him on his mobile phone. Both of them feel sad and don't really know what to say or promise. They have no idea when they will see each other again or even if there will be another time, so they just wish each other well. While the train departs, our hero has to think of a song by the Taiwanese singer Chen Sheng, which is titled *One Night in Beijing* and describes the feeling of leaving a beloved person behind.²⁶

I was singing this song in my head while I saw Beijing disappear in the distance. I knew that eventually this one-night stand would be no more than the dust of history, scattered in the Beijing sky. Nevertheless, for Xiaowei and me, this one night in Beijing had been engraved upon our lives and the mark it had left would never fade.

Thus ends the realistic description of a perhaps slightly idealized love affair for one night, which will doubtlessly appeal to many a reader who can relive the described events and emotions from a similar experience, while it will give an interested reader without such

²⁶ 陳升：《北京一夜》

experience the feeling of having witnessed what a one-night stand might be like, and at the same time provide him with useful instructions. Compared to *Single-Winged Angels*, the author of this story has striven more to produce a story that is meant to *divert* – which is also a possible criterion to distinguish literary from expository texts. This divertive character can be represented by the use of poetical language, i.e. imagery and allusions, which is one of the features that clearly develops with the rise of Comrade Literature as a genre.

On the other hand, stories tend to be deemed divertive when readers can relate to situations or characters described. Such readers are typically the people who do not primarily read these Internet novels for their literary artistic value, which – looking at the popularity rates of the stories – probably means the majority of the genre’s readership. Consequently, the content of a Comrade novel is more significant for its success or popularity than its form, and most authors choose to write accordingly. Writing a story with a certain sense of originality, but more importantly without wandering off too far from a recognizable setting, has proven to be a successful strategy. As we will see, the practice of referring to this recognizable extra-textual reality will be carried on in later Comrade novels as well, and the use of a familiar background for stories also largely explains the immense popularity of the next type of Comrade novels.

However, before we come to that, I wish to make some further remarks at this point on the overall outline of my argument and the general tendencies in the genre’s development.

As I have said at the beginning of this chapter, the order in which I deal with the stories is not exactly chronological, but only roughly according to periods of publication. The earliest Comrade novels (first-generation novels) were published relatively soon after the Internet became available to large numbers of people, and the stories have very similar plots, probably inspired by *A Story from Beijing*. The stories that I refer to as novels of the second generation are written by authors who have presumably read many Comrade novels on the Web before publishing their own story, and who are often well-informed when it comes to the Chinese gay scene, which in itself is only a relatively new phenomenon. The second generation comprises most Comrade novels from the late 1990s until approximately the year 2000. Because the second generation in Comrade Literature has brought along an increased thematic diversity, I have classified these stories according to their different themes. Although this classification implies breaking with chronology, which means that some stories that are now classified in different categories may have in fact been written simultaneously, I believe that putting the selected stories in this particular order effectively reveals the continuous

evolving and maturing of the genre more clearly than the stories' order of appearance would.²⁷ The overview that I present in this chapter tries to reconstruct developments on several levels that took place simultaneously. My (re)presentation is a workable model for trying to be as extensive as possible, while hopefully reducing the risk of producing only a tedious inventory.

As we have seen, the three stories in the category *Happy Family?* show a deviation from the earliest Comrade novels, while they ventured to raise the sensitive issue of homosexuality being disapproved of by mainstream society, whereas novels in the tradition of *A Story from Beijing* do not. This first category of the second generation thus leads the way into a tradition of more credible plots, in which characters face real life. Although the stories do not present effective solutions, this category can be seen as an account of the main problem that gay people are confronted with in today's Chinese society, and the different stories that belong to the category describe the various ways in which the problem presents itself. The second category, *Tips & Tricks*, deals with gay issues of a more intrinsic nature, i.e. practical matters between gay people, often concerning relationships. A big difference with the first category is that these stories are full of various types of advice, either indirect or very straightforward, on how to act under particular circumstances. In more recent stories we will see how authors start dealing with problems regarding the relationship between Chinese gay people and mainstream society as well.

Another trend that has evolved in stories of the second generation is that authors have tried to tune in to their gay readership by presenting identifiable characters and situations, so as to increase the sense of realism, which has turned out to have a positive effect on the stories' popularity. In stories of the first category, this sense of realism is sometimes used to distract the attention from imperfections in the plot's integrity, while 'realism' in stories of the second category sometimes inclines towards voyeurism.

In *Campus Life*, as third and last category of the second-generation Comrade novels, most of the above-mentioned developments still play an important role. What the four stories have in common is their setting, but the plots differ in all four cases, and we will see the last important developments in narrative style as a preamble to the third generation in Comrade Literature.

²⁷ Even apart from any other problems with respect to Internet novels and chronology, as mentioned earlier.

Campus Life

The four stories in this category are set on and around university campuses, and all the protagonists are university students. As we will see, the choice of a university campus to serve as background in Comrade novels adds to the stories' sense of familiarity and realism, and allows authors to further explore some of the dilemmas and problems that gay readers encounter in daily life, while temporarily avoiding others.

Purple Rain Love begins with a melodramatic scene in which the protagonist A-Mu and his boyfriend Tan Jun are breaking up. The reason is that Tan Jun doesn't see a future for them, as their relationship is 'abnormal' and they should in fact be together with women. Outside it is raining and Tan Jun points through the window to show A-Mu that in one spot the rain is coloured purple. When A-Mu objects that the rain merely *seems* purple because it is falling in front of a window from which a purple light is radiating, Tan Jun persists that the rain is purple, because only those particular raindrops are falling in that specific spot, so they must be different from other raindrops. He also says that their love is like that purple rain, without further explaining his remark, but he adds that A-Mu will find out in due time. The next chapter takes us back to our hero's teenage years and we read how he realises that he is 'different' from other people:

When my puberty came, I began to panic. Terrified I watched as my body was changing: from the small and skinny boy that I was in my last year of secondary school, I suddenly turned into a 1.78-meter tall guy. Girls began to look at me with a fervent glance in their eyes. However, I would always hide instinctively, out of a strange urge. But apart from that, I was no different from any other guy. I had a healthy and strong body, perhaps even attractive, and my elder sister would always pinch my arm and say that under my skin there was only muscle. I played football, listened to rock-music and when I was together with classmates, I would shout along whenever some pretty girl walked by. But when everything got quiet I would feel lonesome, and for a long time I didn't know where this loneliness came from. Up until the day when I first met Tan Jun. When I saw him, I understood what had been troubling my mind. I fell in love with him, and as I did, I told myself that I couldn't love him because he was a boy, just like me. But I did fall in love with him, and there was nothing that I could do about it.

Falling in love with Tan Jun was the happiest experience of my life. Whenever I saw him I had to think of the girls in secondary school who would look at me with that fervent glance, and figured that they must have felt the same for me, as I knew that I was as handsome as Tan Jun.

At first Tan Jun didn't notice me, which depressed me. But in our third year at university, he became infatuated with rock music.

It is music that brings the two together. A-Mu finds out that Tan Jun is playing in a student rock band called *Icefire*, and he joins the group just to be around him more often. Before long, the two get to know each other and they become close friends. Then one night, when Tan Jun is under the influence of alcohol, he gives away that if A-Mu were a girl, he would definitely love him. And although A-Mu doesn't understand why he needs to be a girl to earn Tan Jun's love, he concludes from this remark that Tan Jun obviously does have feelings for him. However, at first he meticulously avoids using the word 'love' to name the feeling that exists between them:

It was not because I thought our feelings were not profound enough to use that word, but because I thought the word was like a spell that would make it all end when uttered. I knew that what was going on between me and Tan Jun *was* love, but we were afraid to say it out loud, and we were even more afraid to let anyone else know about it, because then we would surely be despised by everybody and be expelled from school.

The understanding between the two friends gradually grows. A-Mu even tells Tan Jun about his tyrannical father who used to abuse his elder sister, and how they didn't feel sorry when he died. When the two kiss each other for the first time, they finally dare to recognize the fact that they are lovers, even though they cannot let the outside world know:

Being in love was grieving at the same time, because we could never be real lovers, as nobody would acknowledge our love. They would call us homosexuals, and homosexuals were abnormal. Tan Jun and I could not understand why we were abnormal, we only knew that we were in love, and apart from that we were just like anybody else. Only we weren't allowed to do anything that all other lovers could do freely. We didn't dare to call each other, to do our homework together, to give each other presents, and when there were other people around we would hardly dare to look at each other. And yet we felt happy because we had found our own way to express our love. When Tan Jun used to bring me a rose now and then, I was of course thrilled but I had no idea where to put them. In the end I came up with a most ingenious way to dispose of the flowers, and that was to eat them. I would pluck the red rose petals one by one, then rip them into little pieces, put the pieces in a glass, add sugar and drink it all down with some water. I believed that in this way I could preserve Tan Jun's love for me.

In the part that follows, we can read what difficulties A-Mu and Tan Jun have to face when people on campus start to suspect that they have a relationship. When Tan Jun goes to see A-Mu in his dorm, all roommates disappear and even their friends of *Icefire* start avoiding them. They have daydreams of going to the USA where they think nobody will despise them and they even can marry, but they know there is no chance that either one of them is bright enough to be granted a scholarship. And what is more important, neither one of them thinks highly of the USA, they both prefer to stay in China, 'even though China is the one place where their love is not tolerated'. When A-Mu tells his sister about his relationship with Tan Jun, she is definitely not amused, but she doesn't think her brother is to blame, given the fact that they had 'such an abnormal father'. She even goes to Tianjin to meet her brother's boyfriend. The three have dinner together and the atmosphere gets tense when A-Mu's sister is talking sceptically about their future perspectives. In the end, Tan Jun runs off because he feels offended, and A-Mu follows after assuring his sister that he is happy with his boyfriend. However, Tan Jun is heavily distressed by A-Mu's sister's disapproval, as he himself also believes it is unnatural for two boys to have such a relationship. The only way for A-Mu to soothe him is to declare quasi-seriously that he is actually a girl. For Tan Jun this is not enough, and it takes an unsuccessful affair with a 'real' girl for him to realise how much he is in love with A-Mu.

The last part of the story describes how the two lovers finally allow themselves to be happy, and they even rent an apartment together where they don't have to deal with the rest of the world. Only now and then do they worry about what will happen after they graduate, but they are mainly having a great time. Until something happens that foreshadows the story's unhappy ending:

One time, when *Icefire* performed in Tianjin's largest discotheque, Tan Jun was singing better than ever before, and in his elated mood he forgot about everything. Suddenly he grabbed me, while I was playing the guitar, and he screamed to the audience: 'This is A-Mu, and everything I sing tonight is dedicated to him. A-Mu, I love you!' It is not hard to guess what happened next. First there was chaos in the band. Then, before anybody knew what was happening, somebody yelled: 'He's a freak! He's gay! Tear him down!' The whole audience came rushing towards us, and all band members were beaten up badly. Tan Jun suffered most, and when everybody had left, I saw that he was covered with blood, lying on a pile of electrical wire. In his eyes I saw the same perplexity as when I first met him, and it really broke my heart.

After this incident, the band breaks up, and the two lovers know that their happy days are over. The night on which the two are watching the purple rain outside their window is their last night together. The next morning, Tan Jun is gone. Many years later, A-Mu receives a letter from Tan Jun, in which he says that he will probably spend the rest of his life trying to find the happiness that has eluded them. Enclosed is a lengthy poem that Tan Jun wrote one day after leaving A-Mu, in which he makes an obscure comparison between their love and the purple rain on that particular night. The story ends as follows:

I think I read through the poem on the pink paper with a smile on my face. Then I opened the window and tore the letter into little pieces, just like I used to do with the roses that Tan Jun had given me. Only this time I didn't eat the pieces, but I threw them out of the window, where it was raining. In a blink of the eye, they transformed into innumerable rose petals, floating in the cold and pouring rain, twisting, falling. I figured it was pretty much like the love between Tan Jun and me had been: dazzling, lively, confusing, shattered, abandoned, lonesome, beautiful, dreary, twisting and falling in the rain, forever falling...

The story does not say whether or not either one of the protagonists has eventually married. It even leaves room for the possibility that the two of them will be together again one day, although the last paragraph is hardly optimistic. The purple rain clearly serves as a metaphor for homosexual love, which is seemingly different from heterosexual love, perhaps even *destined* to be different, but certainly no less beautiful than any other kind of love. The paradox with which the characters in the story are confronted must be highly recognizable to Chinese gay readers: the fact that they don't feel any different from other people, but are obviously perceived to be different. The challenge is how to live with this paradox without being hurt and without hurting others. Although this story offers no satisfying solution, and repeatedly mentions that Chinese society does not tolerate people to have a homosexual lifestyle, the overall tone is more encouraging than in the three stories in the category *Happy Family?*. That is partly explained by the fact that the story is set on a university campus, where the characters only have to deal with their fellow students or perhaps with university officials but not with persons closer to them, such as parents. In this particular story, *Purple Rain Love*, A-Mu's sister represents the home front. Her role in the story is to point out that a homosexual relationship clashes with the scheme of things according to Chinese society – which is a parental reaction that most young Chinese gay people dread. However, in this case the sister is able to put her opinion aside as she believes that their father is to blame for her little brother's 'abnormal' behaviour.

There is more to say about the university campus serving as a background for Comrade novels. In the first place, it fits into the trend of writing more realistic stories with a recognizable setting, so as to decrease the distance between characters and readership. As I have argued before, in stories of the second generation the confluence between readership and authorship stands out, while authors tend to be inspired by previous examples that they have read. The popularity of a real-life setting is a direct result of this development. It is therefore not surprising that so many Comrade novels of the second generation deal with life on campus, as the majority of readers *and* authors of these stories are students themselves, or at least they belong to the same peer group.²⁸

Another important factor that has probably led to the immense popularity of campus stories is what we could already conclude from this first example: the fact that a university campus is somewhat like a microcosm, which not only in real life but also from a narrative point of view forms an ideal playground to explore the challenges of accepting one's sexual preference and facing the reactions of other people, while temporarily leaving the problem of filial obligations out of consideration. However, contrary to what happens in first generation Comrade novels or some of the other stories of the second generation, I believe that avoiding the issue of a confrontation with parents and relatives by setting a story on campus is not a deliberate diversion tactic. These authors do not shy away from writing a story with a high sense of (sometimes harsh) reality, but the characters in the stories, probably as well as the authors, have not reached a point in their life where this confrontation is becoming inevitable. And most likely, the same is true for the majority of present-day Comrade novel readership.

In the light of the genre's development, the fact that authors no longer deliberately shy away from tackling sensitive issues can be seen as a sign of maturation. This is also true for the increased attention that authors pay to style. The metaphor in *Purple Rain Love*, albeit still fairly awkward, is definitely an attempt to add literary depth to the story. This increased attention to the form of Comrade novels is the last important development as a preamble to the third generation. But before we come to that, we will first further explore the topic of campus life in Comrade Literature.

The second novel in this category, *Boys and Leaves*, shows some striking similarities with the previous one. The story starts when our protagonist confidently enters the campus on his first day at university. Contrary to most of his fellow students he hasn't brought along his parents,

²⁸ There are probably no official figures to support this assumption, but it would be hard to conclude otherwise from looking at the contents of Websites on which these stories are published and spread.

which adds to his sense of freedom and independence. We learn that our protagonist has enrolled in the faculty of philosophy, a subject in humanities that he doesn't think of highly and which leaves him with a lot of spare time. He uses this time to explore and develop his personality: he grows his hair, he wears jeans with holes and a silver earring, and he starts to like rock music. As in the previous story, it is the protagonist's alternative lifestyle that brings him into contact with his companions Lintian and Xiaolü, only this time because of a poster with a half-naked Jim Morrison that he has put on the door of his dormitory. Lintian looks like a regular university student, but he loves rock music and feels attracted to Jim Morrison as an idol. Although Xiaolü's style is rather alternative, he actually doesn't care very much for rock music, but he feels attracted to Jim Morrison's appearance. We learn in a matter-of-fact way that both our protagonist and Xiaolü have a boyfriend, only Lintian has a girlfriend. Interestingly, our protagonist has met his boyfriend on the university BBS. The three couples often hang out together and the fact that two of the couples are homosexual doesn't seem to be an issue at all. Even when Lintian finds himself in the unusually awkward situation of being caught in bed with one of his male teachers by the cleaning ladies, it is merely presented in the story as a 'very understandable slip'. What happened is that the ladies entered the room upon hearing suspicious sounds, possibly indicating illicit behaviour between a boy and a girl, but they found nothing unusual in two men sleeping together.²⁹ Although the incident causes some rumour on campus, it doesn't have any serious consequences. Lintian accepts the fact that he feels attracted to men without any problem, and deplores the lack of privacy in Chinese society, where people enter your room to check on you. This experience strengthens him in his determination to go to the USA upon graduation. The only victim is Lintian's girlfriend who feels betrayed, but for Lintian there is no way back. When he finds out that his teacher is already seeing somebody else, he starts dating on the Internet and before long he finds a new boyfriend.

While Lintian enjoys his new lifestyle, Xiaolü starts to feel depressed for reasons that do not become clear. Although he has a loving boyfriend, Xiaolü has the feeling that 'love is slipping away from them'. One time, when Xiaolü is taking a stroll on the campus with our protagonist, he anxiously tries to catch a leaf that is falling from a tree. When he fails to catch it, Xiaolü is quite distressed because he believes that this is yet another sign that love is slipping away. He never gets out of his depression, and one day jumps from a building and dies before the eyes of his boyfriend, as 'proof that he still loves him'.

²⁹ Much more than in the West, it is quite common for men in China to have intimate physical contact, for example holding hands. It is also not unusual to share a bed with someone of the same sex, for practical reasons.

Life on campus goes on, and as graduation is nearing, all students are on the lookout for a good job. Our protagonist's boyfriend urges him to find a local job, in Shanghai, because he is afraid that his parents wouldn't allow him to go and live somewhere else, and separation would mean the end of their relationship. To make sure that he will find a job, our protagonist even cuts his long hair and starts wearing clothes that are considered normal by mainstream society. Eventually he succeeds in finding a job, and he can stay in Shanghai with his boyfriend. Lintian's goal is to take TOEFL³⁰ and GMAT³¹ exams and then go to the USA to pursue his career.

The story ends with a scene in which all graduated students bid their farewells and leave for their different destinations. Our protagonist compares the young graduates with leaves that fall from a tree: they will just go anywhere the wind blows. Lintian decides to break up with his boyfriend, because he doesn't want to make any promises for a future that is still uncertain. When Lintian and our protagonist walk through the dormitory one last time, they see two young, newly arrived students having an animated conversation in front of the room where they have lived for four years, and the two graduates look at each other with a meaningful smile on their face.

What is most remarkable in this story, is the natural ease with which homosexuality is presented. Not at one point do we get the impression that gay love is unusual, or something to be secretive about. The intrusion by the dormitory cleaning ladies was meant to unveil misdemeanours of a sexual nature, but they didn't suspect anything when they just found two males in one bed. And although Xiaolü's suicide was a result of troubles in the relational realm, it was not a 'gay problem' that led to this dramatic event, which one would have expected in earlier Comrade novels. In general, the author doesn't make much effort to provide any contextual explanation about the world in which his characters live: the way in which the author uses expressions and refers to situations that are closely linked to life on a Chinese campus suggests that he assumes his readers to be familiar with the world he describes. Also, specific behaviour of Chinese gay students, such as using chat rooms or even the university BBS to find a boyfriend, are merely mentioned as a habitual part of daily life.

When we compare this to stories in the category *Tips & Tricks*, we see a shift in the author's assessment of his readership's mind-set. Issues that might have been presented as instructive once are now considered to be common knowledge and have moved to the

³⁰ Test of English as a Foreign Language, required for students who wish to attend university in the USA.

³¹ Graduate Management Admission Test, required for admission to MBA or other graduate management courses.

background. Freed from the aspiration to be informative, we see that authors start to pay more attention to the plot and style of Comrade novels. The fact that the novels in this category are all situated on university campuses facilitates this development, because the authors primarily address readers not only with an educational background comparable to their own, but also with similar living conditions, experiences, ideals and interests as the characters in the stories. And while university students form a large part of the Chinese Internet population, it is not surprising that the authors and novels in this category have played an important role in the development of the genre.

The story *Boys and Leaves* does not take us off campus. At the end of the story, we know that the protagonist will stay in Shanghai, where he can be together with his boyfriend. We don't learn how their relationship will further develop, or what possible difficulties they will encounter if they stay together in the future. However, the outlook is more positive than at the ending of *Purple Rain Love*. Not only does the protagonist's relationship still stand firm, we can also find comfort in the suggestion that the story will continue with another generation of newly arrived students on the campus. Although neither story ventures to explore possible future developments, they both mention going abroad as a way to gain more freedom and more control over one's private life. In *Purple Rain Love* it remains a dream, as the protagonists don't have the necessary ambition or the desire. In *Boys and Leaves*, Lintian pursues his plan to go to the USA, but with a common sense of realism by saying that 'of course not all Americans can accept homosexuality', and 'wherever you go, there will always be people who want to control your life'. However, studying abroad is a hot issue among Chinese students, and there are certainly young Chinese gay people who think of this possibility as a way to build up a more independent life, far away from parents and relatives, who often have the best intentions but sometimes are perceived as undesirably interfering. As a matter of fact, there are quite some Comrade novels that are set abroad and often describe the lives of Chinese students. Although these stories pay less attention to certain issues from the perspective of content, they do reflect the increasing efforts with regard to the narrative aspect, and should therefore not be left out in this analysis.

Zhao Xiaoming in Love is a lengthy and rather light-hearted story about two Chinese students in the USA. This novel is highly entertaining, as it does not plunge into difficult matters and dwells on feelings and actions of a more frivolous nature. In a way, the story reads as a television soap opera, slowly and circuitously evolving towards a long-anticipated climax.

The story begins when the protagonist Zhao Xiaoming drives to the airport to pick up Zhou Tian, another Chinese student who will attend university in New York. At their first encounter at the airport Zhou Tian immediately makes a deep impression on Xiaoming, of whom we know that he is gay. Xiaoming lives together with Ah-May, a Chinese girl who knows about Xiaoming's sexual preference. Zhou Tian will spend his first night at their place, and Xiaoming wouldn't mind sharing his bed with this handsome boy, but he is hesitant to raise the issue. Fortunately, Zhou Tian brings it up first:

'Xiaoming, where do I sleep tonight?'

Yes, where should he sleep? Zhao Xiaoming's eyes scanned the room. According to American customs, it would be silly to share your bed with even your best friends, although he had a large, king-size bed. But then again, according to Chinese customs, it would only be natural to offer a guest a place in your own bed.

'I do have a sleeping bag, we could put it on the carpet in the living room, but perhaps a sleeping bag is too hot in summer. Or you could sleep on the couch. You've missed one night's rest on the plane, so you must be very tired. If you don't sleep well, you might not get over your jetlag. So...'

'Xiaoming, your bed is so big, can't we just sleep in it together?'

Zhao Xiaoming's heart jumped. 'Yes, of course. I don't mind...'

Xiaoming's excitement is somewhat stifled when Zhou Tian asks if he can call his girlfriend who studies in Canada. After a calm night, we read about Xiaoming's visit to his parents in China earlier that summer. They ask if Xiaoming has already found a girlfriend, as he is now 24 years old, but Xiaoming tells them that he has not yet found anyone. He feels quite bored during his stay with his parents, and he is glad that he can call his former schoolmate and good friend Li Yiran. In another flashback we learn about their time together.

Xiaoming and Li Yiran have attended the same university in China and in their last year they were even roommates. But their first encounter is in the joint dormitory bathroom, one early morning while brushing their teeth. The two become close friends and often visit each other in their dorm rooms. Their closeness does not go unnoticed by the other roommates, and one evening the following scene takes place:

Li Yiran threw his schoolbag on the desk. When he saw that Zhao Xiaoming, only wearing a tanktop, was sitting on his bed and chatting animatedly with his roommates, he knocked him softly on the head with his knuckles. 'Who is this savage boy? Don't you think you should go to bed?'

‘Why do you beat me?’

‘I only beat you because I care for you.’ He copied Zhao Xiaoming’s cheekiness. ‘Beating and scolding are tokens of my love.’

Xiaosan was already lying in bed, but now he joked in a looming voice: ‘Oh, they are gay! There is something homosexual going on between them...’

Then some others also started to make teasing remarks. Li Yiran was quiet for a moment, and then he snarled: ‘Shut up! You guys talk nothing but rubbish.’

Zhao Xiaoming laughed, unabashed, and said: ‘And what if we *were* gay? It’s quite fashionable these days. Li Yiran is such a handsome guy, but I haven’t seen any girls chasing him. Well, if they don’t chase him, I will.’

Instantly, a pandemonium broke loose and all roommates were laughing and shouting. Even people from other rooms who heard the noise came to see what was going on. Zhao Xiaoming was extremely pleased with himself, but Li Yiran dragged him out of the room and shoved him back into his own room. Zhao Xiaoming was still grinning. When he turned around, he saw Li Yiran’s face in the light that was coming from the hallway. His face was a little red, as if he had drunk too much. Liu Tao, a longhaired guy who studied journalism, was sitting at the end of the hallway, playing the guitar. He was singing softly: ‘You are the brightest star in the sky, for me, but between us, there are millions of light-years, and we cannot cross the distance in our lifetime...’

Zhao Xiaoming is hoping that Li Yiran will show more affection for him after his disguised confession, but to no avail. He desperately agrees to join Li Yiran in his efforts to go abroad, so that they can spend more time together. They study in the library every day to prepare for their TOEFL and GRE³² exams. To escape the summer heat, Xiaoming lets Li Yiran stay with him at his parents’ place, which is also in Shanghai and has air-conditioning. Xiaoming secretly hopes that ‘something that shouldn’t happen will happen’ between them, obviously indicating acts of an amorous nature, but Li Yiran is too preoccupied with the exams to pay any special attention to Xiaoming. When the examinations are over, Xiaoming has the better results of the two friends, although he hasn’t exerted himself nearly as much as Li Yiran in preparation for the tests. For a short period of time this puts a strain on their friendship, in which Li Yiran starts having an affair with a girl called Zheng Min. Initially Xiaoming feels heartbroken, but he gradually grows accustomed to the new situation. Li Yiran also gets over his disappointment and accepts the fact that only Xiaoming has been granted a scholarship to the USA. The three of them often hang out together, until the day that Li Yiran and Zheng Min leave for Beijing and Zhao Xiaoming only has to arrange the last formalities before his

³² Graduate Record Examination. This test is used as a general assessment of the knowledge and abilities of applicants to graduate schools in the USA.

departure to the USA. At the end of this flashback, when Xiaoming has talked to Li Yiran on the phone while staying with his parents during the summer holiday, we find out which lessons Xiaoming has drawn from his experiences in China and his stay in America so far:

Now that Zhao Xiaoming had spent some time in America, things were very clear to him. Although Li Yiran did have a certain gay inclination, he was definitely a straight guy. There was even no way that he would be bisexual. Nevertheless he still had feelings for him. Hearing his voice or seeing him would still fill him with joy, just like many gay people are infatuated by Brad Pitt, though everybody knows that he's straight. [...]

Zhao Xiaoming now knew that sissy guys were not necessarily gay, and reasoning the opposite, guys who were not sissy were not necessarily *not* gay.

This brings us back to the present, where Xiaoming is still speculating about Zhou Tian's sexual inclination. In order to get to know each other better, Xiaoming seizes every opportunity to be together with him, and from time to time he mentions homosexuality just to observe Zhou Tian's reaction. On one occasion, they go to New York City and watch the movie *Happy Together* by Wong Kar-wai,³³ about the tempestuous love story between two gay men from Hong Kong. From that day onwards, Xiaoming and Zhou Tian often allude to homosexual feelings for each other, but in such ambiguous ways that most of the story is filled with their mutual misunderstandings. The story is told from Xiaoming's perspective and we know all about his feelings and fantasies, while we can only guess what is going on in Zhou Tian's head. The following scene is one example of their many close encounters, just before Zhou Tian's girlfriend will come over from Canada to visit him:

It was already past nine o'clock when they finished swimming. Zhao Xiaoming noticed that Zhou Tian was only wearing a shirt, while he had already put on a thin woollen vest and was still feeling a bit chilly on the neck. He felt Zhou Tian's hands, but those were warm.

Zhou Tian said: 'Your hands are so cold!'

'Yes, my hair is still wet.'

'I'm okay, my hands are not as cold as yours.'

'Of course not.' Zhao Xiaoming took a towel from his bag and vigorously rubbed his hair. He said: 'The difference is that your loved one will come tomorrow, so you are warm inside.'

'Ha...' Zhou Tian laughed in an affected manner. 'Shouldn't you feel even warmer then? You can always be together with your loved one.'

³³ 《春光乍洩》，王家衛. Hong Kong, 1997.

Zhao Xiaoming looked at Zhou Tian, stunned, the towel still in his hands. When Zhou Tian saw the surprise on Zhao Xiaoming's face, he added: 'Am I not right? You and Ah-May are always together, so you must be very happy.'

Zhao Xiaoming was speechless. He silently folded the towel and put it back into his bag. In the rising evening wind he felt a twinge in his nose, and with lowered head he slowly started walking. Zhou Tian followed and looked at Zhao Xiaoming, also with his head low. Zhao Xiaoming felt so grieved that he had tears in the corners of his eyes.

'What's up, Xiaoming? Are you mad at me?' Zhou Tian asked in a soft voice.

'No.' Zhao Xiaoming lifted his head and forced a smile on his face. 'Why should I be mad? Isn't it well-known that I am happy with Ah-May?'

Zhou Tian was silent. They walked to the car, and after they got in Zhou Tian said: 'I must go home now. My place is still a mess. I will have to clean it up before Xiaojing gets here tomorrow. Just take me home please.'

'Okay.' Zhao Xiaoming was still in low spirits. He didn't put on any music. The car felt like a freight ship, silently navigating through the lonely night.

Zhou Tian tried again: 'Xiaoming, are you really not mad at me?'

'No.' Zhao Xiaoming smiled at Zhou Tian, trying to look cool.

Zhou Tian bit on his upper lip, rolled his eyes and said: 'I know that you're mad at me. I shouldn't have brought up you and Ah-May.'

'What about Ah-May and me? What do you know about my relationship with Ah-May?' Zhao Xiaoming looked at Zhou Tian with a bitter smile.

'I'm not really sure. But I think it's not like what everybody is saying. Maybe you love Ah-May, but she doesn't love you back. I... I really don't know. I am just guessing.' Zhou Tian contemplated: 'But... Perhaps she loves you as well, but she only wants to put you to the test or something. Anyhow, you are already living together.'

Zhao Xiaoming shook his head. 'You really have no idea, and you would never guess. Her and me... We are only friends, nothing more. There is absolutely no love between us.'

'Don't say that, Xiaoming. I think she cares for you very much, at least in day-to-day life. Perhaps she is just very independent because she has been in the States for so long. Maybe you like girls who are more compliant.'

'What makes you think that I like compliant girls?' Zhao Xiaoming was now really getting a bit angry. He thought, I don't even like compliant boys. What was Zhou Tian thinking?

'I... I don't know. I said I was just guessing. Like my girlfriend, she is really caring, but I'm not sure...' Zhou Tian sighed.

'You don't like compliant girls either?' Zhao Xiaoming asked. 'I thought they were your type.'

'Oh, you think you know me very well?' Zhou Tian sighed again. 'Actually I'm not sure what I really want. Xiaoming, can you tell me what kind of person you like?'

'Me? Why, do you want to find me a girlfriend?' Zhao Xiaoming said: 'I am already in love with someone, but I'm afraid to tell it.'

'Really? And it's not Ah-May?'

'No. But I won't tell you.'

'You don't want to tell me?' A cunning smile appeared on Zhou Tian's face. 'I'm also in love with someone, but if you don't tell me, I won't tell you either.'

Zhao Xiaoming said: 'Ha, you want to trick me, you little bastard? That won't be so easy. Isn't your girl coming tomorrow? If it is true what you're saying, then break it off with her if you got the guts.'

Zhou Tian was silenced for a moment, but then he warily said: 'That's not unthinkable.'

'You don't give up, do you?' Zhao Xiaoming teased: 'I'd say the most important thing is that you should now keep up your male vitality. If you think you're not up to it, I could bring you some ginseng pills tomorrow.'

'You bastard!' Zhou Tian anxiously said. 'I think you are the one who has a problem, otherwise why would you need a stock of ginseng pills? Just keep them for yourself. And if it doesn't help you, I've got some royal jelly that you can take. But then don't come to me if you get too worked up.'

'Come to you?' Zhao Xiaoming immediately answered. 'Why would I come to you? Would you have a way to release me of my excessive heat? Are you gay or what?'

Zhou Tian laughed. 'Look who's talking.'

'If I were gay, I would certainly go to you to discharge. Is that what you want?' Zhao Xiaoming was now laughing as well, and he felt reckless.

'If you are gay, then why don't you go to that Taiwanese friend of yours? Hahaha...'

'Because he is not good enough for me, I only want you! Hahaha...'

'Then just wait until I've got rid of my girlfriend. Hehehe...'

Both of them were giggling, and the gloomy atmosphere was completely gone. Meanwhile, they had already arrived at the dormitory. Zhao Xiaoming stopped the car carefully at the side of the road. The two looked at each other for a moment, and then Zhou Tian said: 'I should go now.'

In the last part of the story, we read how Zhou Tian's girlfriend comes to visit him, and how Zhao Xiaoming has a one-night stand with a boy called Zhang Zujie, a Taiwanese schoolmate. However, Zhou Tian really breaks up with his girlfriend and the two friends finally declare their feelings for each other. At the rather abrupt ending of the story we learn that Zhao Xiaoming and Zhou Tian are living happily together.

The only problems that are addressed in this story seem to be how to express your affection for someone without knowing what his reaction will be, and how to find out about someone's possible interest in a homosexual relationship in general. In this particular novel, these issues are not worked out in an attempt to effectively overcome them, but mainly to serve as an entertaining plot for a story that focuses on outlining the lives of Chinese students who are

attending university in the USA. To this end, the author gives detailed descriptions of the characters' actions and living conditions, displaying his obvious familiarity with the *couleur locale*. In this respect, the story fits into the trend of increased attention to the plot of Comrade novels. Where we have already seen some examples of experimenting with style, we can conclude from this story that there is also room for sub-themes, which are presented as equally appealing to readers in addition to homosexuality. This turns out to be another important feature in the development of the genre, as will become clear when we look at third-generation Comrade novels. But before we will do that, I would like to conclude this section on *Campus Life* with a story that will eventually take us one step further.

Lovers under a Starry Sky is a story about the unrequited love of the protagonist Lei for his fellow student and good friend Xu over a period of approximately one year. Every chapter starts with an indication of time and some lines from a poem by the author. The first chapter starts as follows:

1.
(Third year at university, second semester)

With difficulty I trudge through the desert of love
where every oasis is just another illusion.
- *Spring Anthology*, Longlei.

Both Lei and Xu are spending one night on guard at the campus sports ground, where the school tournament will take place the next day. Lei has specially arranged that he can be on the same shift with Xu, and he is sulking because Xu hasn't even noticed this. However, Xu does notice that he has upset Lei in some way and he tries to cheer him up. When Xu agrees to camp in an improvised bed together with Lei that evening, Lei immediately forgets Xu's carelessness.

When we returned, we started to prepare our bed. We used my army coat as a mattress, I had brought my pillow and he his blanket. Even though we didn't take off any clothes, I was still going to sleep with my loved one. I was extremely excited, and my eyes must have sparkled. Xu put his hand around my waist and said: 'Your eyes are like stars.' He looked up and searched the sky. 'Just like the Big Dipper.' I said: 'Those are seven stars. Two are my eyes, two are

yours, and what about the other three?' Xu pondered for a moment. 'Those must be Erlang's,'³⁴ and we laughed, embracing each other.

The night was freezing cold and the bed was hard, but I could have slept like this every night. We didn't have any sexual intentions, just two people who were sweetly sleeping in each other's arms. It felt like a once in a lifetime experience...

One time when Lei is waiting for Xu in his dorm room, Xu's roommates are joking that he is probably in love with Lei, that he is homosexual. It does not become clear whether they are just wildly guessing, or that Xu has perhaps once told them something. Anyhow, Lei is startled when he hears the word 'homosexual', referring to Xu and consequently to himself. He is afraid that he will cause trouble for Xu if they continue to see each other so frequently, but Xu doesn't want to suddenly stop seeing Lei after the incident, as this would only give their fellow students more grounds to gossip.

On another occasion, Lei's feelings are hurt again and it makes him wonder if Xu is actually in love with him, or just completely ignorant of his feelings. Xu is joining the Chinese Communist Party, one year prior to Lei, though he is one year younger. Joining the Party is a very important event, and Lei has the feeling that he can't keep up with his friend, that he is falling behind. And on that day, when Lei is already feeling down, Xu elatedly brings him some other 'great news': a girl that he knows from secondary school has asked him to come to Shanghai upon graduation, where Xu will have the opportunity to build up his career. Upon hearing this news, Lei is very sad, and he is disappointed about the fact that Xu has apparently not noticed the impact that the news has on Lei. After Lei has secluded himself the whole evening, Xu wants to make up with Lei, but he doesn't seem to grasp the reason for the latter's sadness. He tries to apologize for the fact he is first in joining the Party, as it should have been Lei. Of course the actual reason for Lei's sadness is the fact that Xu doesn't feel bad about going to far-away Shanghai, and Xu's misinterpretation of Lei's reaction makes things even worse.

Before the summer holidays begin, the dormitories are rearranged and Lei is now no longer living in the same building with Xu. Although he is sad about this imposed separation, he tells himself that even if they could still be together now, it would all end with next summer's graduation. He decides not to spend the summer on campus with Xu, because he is

³⁴ 二郎神, a Chinese mythical figure / god, who is said to have a third truth-seeing eye in the middle of his forehead. As a word play, 'Erlang' could also be read as 'Two Husbands'. However, the text does not contain any obvious insinuation on this ambiguity.

afraid that his feelings are getting too intense – feelings that he actually deems objectionable. He makes the following comparison with regard to his affection for Xu:

One morning when I was attending class in building no. 2, I suddenly noticed some bright green twigs that were growing on the shady windowsill, or perhaps from a crack between the bricks. In itself, that was not something remarkable. I knew that in my hometown, more sturdy plants were exuberantly flourishing on the rooftops. But this was a place that never saw sunlight and without any suitable soil. Their destiny was bound to be tragic, yet they were thriving, enjoying life like a regular tree. And I asked myself: was my feeling for Xu not just like these twigs, trying to grow in the shadow?

Unable to bear his inward struggle any longer after the summer, Lei tells Xu that his feelings for him have exceeded those of normal friendship, adding that he will try to change this because he knows it is ‘not right’. Xu’s reaction is rather composed: he only expresses the hope that they can still be friends. Lei cannot promise this, as he feels that he needs to distance himself from Xu if he really wants to forget about his feelings. In the low-spirited mood that is a consequence of his decision, he meets another boy called Long in the gym. Soon, the two are having a sexual relationship, even though Long has a girlfriend who is living in another city. Lei is not very emotionally involved in this relationship, and he doesn’t care about Long having a girlfriend. Even when she breaks up with Long, and Long expresses that he prefers men, Lei does not develop any strong feelings for him. The reason is that he is still in love with Xu.

One year later, both Lei and Xu are once again on the same night shift prior to the school tournament, only this time by chance. They have made no arrangements to sleep together, but they end up talking with each other all night. Xu refers to the remark he made one year before, about Lei’s eyes and the Big Dipper. Only this time he asks if the three other stars are perhaps Long’s eyes, but Lei assures him that these are still Erlang’s. The two hold each other’s hands, and like ‘real men’ they understand that their feelings can only go this far. Lei knows that he shouldn’t be hoping for more.

Graduation day goes by and it is time for the students to bid their farewells. Long is very emotional when he is taking his leave, but Lei is quite unaffected. However, when he sees Xu, he bursts out in tears, even though Xu will only leave after two more days. In their last moments together, as they are walking back to their dormitories, Lei realises that he doesn’t know anything about Xu’s feelings for him, and that Xu has never shown him any consideration. The sadness that he is feeling now is merely caused by the frustration of not

being understood by a person who claims to be his friend. Their story ends when Lei closes the door of his room with a cold ‘goodbye’ and we learn that more than five years have passed since then, in which they have never seen each other again. Lei, who is recalling this story after all those years, concludes by saying that he is still in love with Xu, and that he has never found out about Xu’s feelings for him.

In a short epilogue to the story, the character Lei and the author Longlei seem to become the same person:

I don’t know when the story of the *Lovers under a Starry Sky* will continue, so that I can write a sequel.

My experiences over the past five years have taught me one thing: there is nothing that can be accomplished without any effort, and when it comes to love, it is not even sure that you will achieve anything, no matter how hard you try. Xu is now doing his PhD somewhere, and I am a businessman in Changchun. I believe that if I want to enter the sequel with a smile on my face, I should now do my best to pursue my professional career. But I am not only dwelling in the story of the *Lovers under a Starry Sky*, I will live through any other love story and their sequels with a smile on my face.

Finished on 23 May 1999 in Changchun

As we can see, this story moves beyond the confines of a university campus. At the end of the story we get to know the author (or possibly a fictitious author) who has been able to look back on his time at university, because he has entered another stage of his life. Throughout his time on campus, he has been struggling with his homosexual feelings. Without any direct external cause, he constantly wanted to ‘correct’ his own thoughts and feelings as he was convinced that homosexuality would not be tolerated by Chinese society. At the same time, he cherished the understandable hope that his loved one would answer his feelings of affection. The tragedy of this struggle that largely took place inside the protagonist Lei, is that in the end it even made him wonder whether he should regard Xu as his friend, after all the pain that he had caused Lei with his carelessness. As a reader, one might consider this judgment on Xu a bit harsh, because we don’t know what has been going on in *his* head. However, five years later, the narrator has already been working for some time, and although he says that he is still in love with Xu, he indicates that he is now ready for new relationships. Proof of this changed attitude is his confidence in the fact that he can enter these relationships with a smile on his face, having gained recognition by society through his professional success.

Against the background of the Comrade novels that I have discussed so far, it would make sense to assume that the narrator of this story is indeed the same person as the author, or somebody with a background similar to that of the author, because the story was written in 1999, and deals with an affair that ended five years earlier. This would mean that the protagonist Lei attended university from 1990 - 1994, and it would explain why the characters in this story have so much trouble to show their feelings, or even to accept their own feelings. Lei's self-imposed judgment reminds us of stories that we have seen earlier on, all situated in an era when the characters themselves did not have access to sources such as Comrade novels or discussion boards. Indirectly, this shows once more the correlation between the growing corpus of Comrade novels on the one hand, and the changing contents of the stories on the other.

Although this last story in the category *Campus Life* shows less stylistic or thematic maturity than some of the previous novels, it takes the readers away from the campus. As the genre is maturing, so are the authors of second-generation Comrade novels. Not only with respect to their writing skills or their approach to the issue of homosexuality, but also more literally, in terms of age and occupation. All these simultaneous developments lead to the third generation in Comrade Literature.

Third Generation:

The Art of Writing

At this point we may conclude that increased realism and thematic diversification have defined the genre's overall development so far. With the number of Comrade novels and other resources that have become available to both readers and authors in the course of time, we see the gradual emergence of a more balanced 'Chinese gay identity' within the stories. Characters are no longer stereotypes but they live ordinary lives, the only difference being their sexual preference. As a result, original sub-plots and sub-themes appear in more recent stories. But while the gap between authors and their readership is closing when it comes to common background or experiences, they start to distinguish themselves in another way. With the amount of information available at present, writing a story about homosexuality *per se* is no longer necessarily a guarantee for success. More and more, the authors of Comrade novels have to rely on their literary writing skills in order to impress their readership. The metaphors that we have seen in *Purple Rain Love* and *Boys and Leaves* were first attempts to add literary depth to the novels, and this development is taken further in stories of the third generation. The increased use of inventive plots and poetic language mark the emergence of a new type of Comrade novels. This is of course an important step in the maturation process of Comrade novels as a (semi-) 'literary' genre, but more importantly, it also reflects the growing self-awareness and self-acceptance among Chinese gay people, to which the availability of these new sources has contributed. Whereas the earliest stories serve as a refuge from reality, and are followed by a range of comforting and instructive novels, more recent works show that there is apparently a lesser need for these attributes in Comrade Literature. At the same time, as the amount of available stories is ever growing, readers become more discerning, pushing the authors to use their creative talents to the full extent. This will become clear when looking at the four stories that I have categorized as third-generation Comrade novels. In terms of textual analysis then, I will primarily focus on narrative style in these novels.

The first story that we will look at is *Butterfly Lovers: The Real Story of Liang and Zhu*, an early story with a remarkable plot and with an outspoken judgment on the Chinese attitude towards homosexuality at the end. The story is based on the ancient and famous Chinese love story *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, also known as *The Butterfly Lovers*.³⁵ Over the centuries,

³⁵ 《梁山伯与祝英台》: Because it was impossible for women to attend school in ancient China, Zhu Yingtai dresses like a boy to fool her teachers and fellow students. She falls in love with one of the students, Liang Shanbo,

other authors have frequently used the theme of this story, and it has inspired performing artists and composers. In his turn, the author of this Comrade version presents his own adaptation.

The names of the two protagonists are not mentioned throughout the story, but in the last sentence we can read:

Oh, perhaps I should mention that my name is Liang Shanbo and his name is Zhu Yingtai.

In my review of the story I shall therefore refer to the first-person narrator as Liang, and to his third-person co-protagonist as Zhu. It is not clear in which period of Chinese history the story is set exactly, but definitely in ancient times.

The two boys Liang and Zhu meet each other for the first time when Liang is brought to school in a cart. On the way, they pass Zhu, who apparently has the same destination and is walking along the road. Liang orders the driver to stop, and he offers Zhu a ride. It is immediately clear to the privileged Liang that Zhu is from a poor family, but in spite of their different background, the two become good friends. Another difference is that Liang suffers from bad health, while Zhu is fit and strong. All their fellow students often tease Zhu because of his background, but he doesn't pay much attention to them. We learn that Liang feels attracted to boys, and he is clearly interested in his sturdy friend. Because both of them excel in writing poems they are stimulated to work together, which they prefer to do in seclusion from their schoolmates. They enjoy the moments that they can be together, and on one occasion they are sitting on a mountain when Liang surprises Zhu with a bottle of wine on his birthday. On that day he tells Liang that his father has long since deceased, as well as his little brother. His mother has endured many hardships in raising her only son on her own, and she has set all her hopes on him. In the intimate atmosphere, and slightly intoxicated by the wine, they kiss each other for the first time. From that day onwards, they are so close that also their schoolmates notice it. However, this doesn't seem to affect Liang very much:

who also believes that she is a boy, but who still feels attracted to her. When she returns to her parents a few years later, she urges Liang Shanbo to come and visit her. Her intention is to reveal her real identity and she hopes that he will marry her. However, she doesn't know that her parents have already found her a marital partner. When Liang Shanbo comes, he desperately wants to marry Zhu Yingtai, but her parents have already made up their mind. Liang Shanbo dies from love-sickness, and on the day of Zhu Yingtai's wedding, she insists on walking by his grave. When the bridal procession passes the grave, there is a sudden storm and then the grave is opened by a crack of lightning. Zhu Yingtai jumps into the grave, which then closes again. The storm ceases, and the only thing that is left to see is a pair of butterflies, flying away from the grave.

It was almost inevitable that our stupid classmates started to gossip about our intimacy. However, in the first place, we didn't mind (would you care about the opinion of people that you despise?); second, they had already lost their interest in teasing him; and third, we were not the only boys in our class who had formed a couple (of course to other people it was not more than an innocent game, as there were after all no girls in our school).

But then Zhu is beaten up, after trying to rescue a helpless boy who was tied to a bed and who was about to be raped by some schoolmates in his dorm room. Liang finds the two boys, and he takes them to a hospital to take care of their injuries. The little boy's name is Zhong'er, and he is studying Chinese theatre in a nearby school. He tells them that the boys are often sent off to have sex with men who will pay the school for this 'service'. To avoid any future problems of this kind, Liang asks money from his parents to rent an apartment where the three of them go and live. The three boys snuggle up on one *kang*,³⁶ and at night Liang and Zhu hold each other when they sleep. Liang often plays with Zhu's 'little tree' (referring to his penis) although he is not so sure that Zhu is really asleep, but in daytime they don't talk about their nocturnal escapades.

One day, Liang is summoned back home on the pretext that his mother has fallen ill. When he arrives, he finds out that his mother has only got a cold, and the real reason for calling him back is to introduce him to a girl whom his parents have chosen to be his wife. Understandably, Liang is not interested and he tells his parents that he has to go back to school to prepare for exams. When he returns, Zhu tells him that he has missed Liang very much, even though he was only gone for one night. They now openly acknowledge their love for each other, and that night they make love for the first time.

After a period of intense happiness, the day comes that Liang has to go home and prepare for his marriage. He is so sad about his cruel fate that he falls seriously ill. Zhu comes to visit him and he is afraid that Liang will die. He is prepared to follow Liang in death, because his mother has also arranged a marriage for him. However, Liang bids Zhu not to cause his mother the grief of losing her one and only son.

Twenty days later Liang dies, and his spirit witnesses Zhu's wedding. On his wedding day, Zhu lingers at the edge of a cliff, but in the end he decides not to jump. Liang knows that he will be alone for some time to come, and he enters the body of a dead butterfly. For twenty years he flies around the world, visiting many different places. During this period, there are both male and female butterflies that fancy him, but Liang is waiting for his lover. After

³⁶ A heatable brick bed that is often used by a whole family.

twenty years he returns to his hometown, where Zhu is again standing at the edge of the cliff. His mother has died four days earlier, and this time he does jump to his death – and to Liang. Together they fly around the globe, as two male butterflies, and they see other countries where homosexuality is accepted. They even find out that in China their story has been retold, albeit slightly altered, and with a boy and a girl as Liang and Zhu. The story ends as follows:

There will be one day that the truth about our story will be restored. By that time, our people will have become sounder, more tolerant and more openhearted. I firmly believe that this day will come. And perhaps it is not even that far away! But no matter how the story of Liang and Zhu is passed on to other generations (with a boy and girl, two boys, or two girls), it sings the praise of unchanging and unconditional love. At least it tells people: no matter in what era you live, just as long as you are sincere and are prepared to pay whatever price, even if the common people are against it, when you have really loved someone, you haven't lived in vain. Oh, perhaps I should mention that my name is Liang Shanbo and his name is Zhu Yingtai.

The message of the story seems to be that the prospects for gay people in modern Chinese society have become (or are becoming) more optimistic. The author implies in his concluding paragraph that rejection of homosexuality is a sign of backward thinking, something that belongs to ancient and uncivilized times. This is quite a staunch allegation against Chinese orthodox thinking in comparison to the stories that we have seen so far, and as a conclusion it forms a glaring contrast to the fatalist endings of especially the first-generation novels. But what sets this story apart from, for example, the stories in the categories *Tips & Tricks* or *Campus Life*, is the originality of the plot. While the plot in itself is not innovative, as Liang and Zhu have inspired many story-tellers over the centuries, it is perhaps the first example of turning a well-known, classical story into a Comrade novel.³⁷ As we have seen in stories of the second generation, authors who wanted to deliver a message did not always pay much attention to their plots. It sometimes merely served as a framework to present a message, and any effort to polish such supporting plots was apparently deemed redundant. *Butterfly Lovers: The Real Story of Liang and Zhu* shows the increased attention to style and presentation that has taken place in the transition from second-generation to third-generation Comrade novels.

Another development that already evolves in *Campus Life* stories is the introduction of sub-themes, besides the issue of homosexuality. In third-generation Comrade novels this

³⁷ Another explanation for choosing this particular Chinese classic could be the homoerotic connotation that is often perceived in the original by Chinese gay readers. They reason that Liang had already fallen in love with Zhu while he was still under the impression that she was a boy, and therefore must have felt homosexual love for her/him.

development is also taken one step further, resulting in stories in which homosexuality itself sometimes becomes subordinate to another leitmotiv, for example because of the choice for a broader theme (e.g. subcultures, city life etc.) or the use of a narrative style that is derived from other genres. The latter is evidently demonstrated in *The Story of Little Wen*. This lengthy Comrade novel (400 pages!) reads as a modern *chuanqi*,³⁸ and the author of this story has even applied the characteristics of the genre to such extent that a reader might wonder if it is a *chuanqi*-style Comrade novel, or a *chuanqi* with a homosexual theme.

Considering the length and complexity of this story, I will not provide a meticulous summary of the whole novel with all its extensive sub-plots, as this would go far beyond the scope of an analysis that aims to understand the story's place in the development of the genre. However, in order to demonstrate the narrative style and in particular the use of *chuanqi* characteristics in this novel, I would still like to start by including several translated parts from the first chapter:

The Story of Little Wen

PART 1: The Mirror of Enlightenment

First Chapter: Flower from a former life

(1)

The pouring rain had already lasted for more than ten days on end, and the river was now rising very rapidly. If the dyke on the west side of the river gave in, then the little town of Yanjiang that lay in a basin between the mountains would be completely flooded. Young and old assisted the local army force in guarding the dyke on the west bank, where they were fighting a desperate battle against the elements. There was no railway going through Yanjiang, and the few winding mountain roads that connected the town to the outside world were by now either blocked by mudflows, or the bridges had been washed away by the roaring river. Nobody could have imagined that these lush surroundings of Mt. Changbai with its agreeable climate would ever be jeopardized by such unprecedented heavy torrents! The couple of hundred thousand people who lived here were not prepared for anything like this, and they were absolutely dazed at the sight of the rising water. Because the water level had risen so suddenly, the reinforcement troops that were sent out by the provincial city could not reach the town anymore. They were forced to stay in a village some tens of kilometres off. Everybody was looking out for a rescue team to arrive, but there were only some helicopters flying on and off to pick up the local secretary of the Party Committee and the mayor with their families.

³⁸ 传奇 or Tales of the Marvelous: A popular and highly imaginative form of prose that originated in the Tang-dynasty (618-906 A.D.), often dealing with the supernatural. Many *chuanqi* describe love affairs between spiritual and mortal beings.

The town was still standing, but for some of the lower villages in the vicinity there was no longer any escape. The water had already swallowed more than a hundred homes. The people who were standing on the dyke could see roof beams, furniture and drowned cattle floating in the water. There was also a wooden washtub that was stuck against a tree in the middle of the wild river, from which the crying of a little child sounded. It stopped after two days and two nights.

Mr. Zhang was a teacher who had come to the countryside to visit some relatives. He had taken his wife, to whom he had been married for five years now but without having any children so far, to visit his eighty-six-year-old grandmother who lived on a hilltop just outside of Yanjiang. They had been chatting until nightfall and they spent the night on the big *kang* in the small house on the hilltop. After dark, a frightening thunderstorm rose, and when they woke up the next morning, the water had already reached the foot of the hill, so for now they were trapped. The few families that lived on the hill had gathered together. They watched in terror as the water was rising centimetre by centimetre. Everybody was focused on the slab stone steps that went up the hill, and their hearts quivered whenever another step was taken by the water. The men were squatting under the eaves, smoking one cigarette after another. The women were holding the little children, their faces pale with fear.

[...]

In the afternoon, the rain hadn't become worse, but neither was it getting any better. Mr. Zhang was standing in the doorway. He felt bored as he was staring at the mountain peak in the southwest, looming in the mist. Suddenly, he remembered a story that his grandmother had told him when he was a little boy. It was a story that the people of Yanjiang had passed on from generation to generation and all the people who lived there knew it.

As the story went, there was a peak in the mountain range on the other side that was known as the Demon's Neck, where a serpent spirit dwelled that had been cultivating Taoist techniques for thousands of years. When Yanjiang was still a Manchu village, the serpent spirit harmed the people by eating a young boy and a young girl every year. If the villagers refused to sacrifice their children, then their houses would be flooded by the river. In the end, the villagers desperately went to Chuanchang³⁹ and asked an old ginseng dealer for his assistance. He was a descendant of Zhang Tianshi⁴⁰ and he knew some exorcising techniques. After drinking wine mixed with the blood of a black dog, he collected some sturdy young lads and at night they climbed the Demon's Neck, carrying lanterns and torches. They found the entrance to the snake-hole and they made a fire of leaves to smoke out the thousand-year-old serpent spirit. But after an intense battle, the old master had not succeeded in defeating this snake spirit with its astonishing powers. Instead, the snake had tangled its body around his waist, but just when it looked like he was going to be swallowed, a Dragon Skull Ginseng root fell out of the old master's garment. He had once bought it from an old ginseng digger for three thousand silver bars. It was a very special piece of ginseng that had taken hundreds of years to grow, and it was

³⁹ 船厂: An old name for Jilin City, the provincial capital of Jilin Province. [Original note by the author]

⁴⁰ 张天师: 'Celestial Master Zhang' was a Taoist hermit who lived in the 2nd century BCE and who became one of the Taoist Immortals after ascending to heaven. [Source: Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org), 6 October 2004].

said that eating it would make you immortal. When the big snake saw the ginseng root, he immediately cast the old master away and disappeared into his hole with the ginseng in his beak. The old master, who was lying half dead in the mud, was dragged away by his frightened companions, and they hurried back to the village. After losing his precious ginseng and scared by the serpent, the old master was so vexed that he coughed up blood, and he fell ill for three months. Although the serpent spirit wasn't seen after the incident, the people in the village were so afraid that they hardly dared to leave their homes in broad daylight. But then one night, the old master had a dream. A young, skinny boy came to visit him, and he said: 'I am really a celestial serpent and I have spent nineteen hundred years in the Celestial Lake to train my Taoist skills. I would have needed one hundred years more to reach immortality, but because I have eaten your Dragon Skull Ginseng I can spare myself one hundred years of hardships. Therefore I will no longer harass the people in the village by eating their children, and I will not seek vengeance for destroying my home the other day. My fate will bring me to the human world in three hundred years from now, and I will be reincarnated in your family as a male heir, to repay your benevolence. As a token of my promise, I shall plant a pine tree on the riverbank. When the tree is struck by lightning, then the time has come.' After those words, he turned around and walked out of the door. When the old master awoke, he was soaking in sweat and his illness had gone. He heard surprised cries from the villagers outside, and he rushed to see what was going on. He only saw a long stretch of bright red light that disappeared into the clouds. It was impossible to see its exact shape, and with a loud crack of thunder it was gone.

The serpent spirit hadn't caused any problems ever since, and the little town on the riverside at the foot of the mountains had an agreeable climate all year round. The old master never left the town until he died at the age of ninety. By that time, the pine on the peak next to the river had already grown into a robust tree. The people who lived in the area now said that the serpent spirit had become immortal, and was appointed by heaven to guard the course of the river so that the villagers could live in peace. In the course of time, the story had become more legendary, and the people started to call the serpent spirit 'the Celestial Serpent'. The mountain that used to be the serpent's dwelling place became a sacred spot where people would come during the Spring Festival and Lantern Festival to burn incense and make their wishes. People said that these wishes were often granted.

[...]

'Ah, the weather is getting worse again.' Yuelan's words brought him back to reality. All the people on the hill had now noticed that the sky was becoming darker and the clouds got thicker. It was raining so heavily that the dyke on the other side would certainly be submerged before dawn. Then half of Yanjiang would be flooded.

'It is raining so hard, let's go inside,' Mr. Zhang said.

'Oh, dear Celestial Serpent, if you are really so powerful, please come and rescue these people.' Yuelan was looking in the direction of the Demon's Neck, through a thick curtain of rain. A pine tree stood halfway up the mountain, silently looking down on the roaring river at his feet with an intrepidity that betrayed its old age.

Back inside, they saw that grandmother had woken and was sitting upright on the *kang*, mumbling softly to herself. Even in the middle of the night, Mr. Zhang could not fall asleep. He was listening to the sound of the falling rain, when he suddenly noticed another strange sound. It sounded as if something was sliding through the water, like the hissing sound of sparks from a fuse falling in lamp oil. He pushed his wife next to him and whispered: ‘Yuelan, do you hear that?’

‘Yes. Could it be a boat that has come to fetch us?’ Yuelan was not sleeping either.

‘No way, why would they have waited until now?’

‘Perhaps the rescue workers have arrived, let’s go and have a look.’

‘Okay...’ Mr. Zhang couldn’t sleep anyhow, so he might as well go and have a look. It did sound like a boat.

‘You can stay in bed, I will go and check it out.’ Mr. Zhang quickly put on some clothes. Yuelan decided to come with him after all. They took a flashlight and an umbrella, but at the moment they stepped out of the door, there was a loud crack of thunder and a violet lightning split through the pit black sky. Yuelan was startled and cried: ‘Ah!’ and she cuddled up against Mr. Zhang.

But both of them were well-educated intellectuals, and not so easily intimidated by natural phenomena. In the weak light from the flashlight they slowly found their way on the step stones that led towards the water. Yuelan said in a puzzled voice: ‘What is it tonight? We haven’t had a single thunderstorm all this time, and tonight there is one after another.’

Mr. Zhang looked up at the sky. There were continuous rolls of thunder, and the lightning varied from red and yellow to bluish purple in colour, which made the sky look even more violent and uncanny. The thunder cracks made your heart jump, and you never knew when the next one would startle you. With some difficulty, Mr. Zhang and his wife finally made it to the waterside. They used their flashlight to look out over the water, but there was no boat to be seen. Apart from the racing river there was nothing. But the odd sound still seemed to get louder. Suddenly, Yuelan said: ‘Do you also smell that fragrance?’

‘Yes.’ Mr. Zhang unintentionally pointed his flashlight at the ground, and he was stunned to see that the whole hillside was suddenly full of blooming asters. These flowers that should bud in autumn had now all opened up more than one month earlier, in August. The number of flowers and different subspecies was also astonishing, Mr. Zhang had not noticed that there were so many asters growing on the hill when they had arrived there. They seemed to have appeared out of nothing: white ones, yellow ones, deep purple ones, grouped together and waving in the wind. Because the meadow was alternately in the dark and then suddenly illuminated by lightning, it looked even more colourful and incredible. The scent of the flowers was very refreshing and was sometimes strong and then light again. Mr. Zhang and his wife felt like they had landed a dream.

‘Wow... What is this...?’ It took some time before the two could say something.

Now they heard a roaring sound in the clouds above, as if they were brooding on the ultimate frightening thunderbolt. ‘Come on now, let’s go back, it all makes me feel very uneasy.’

It is just like something terrible is going to happen,' said Yuelan while pulling Mr. Zhang by his arm.

'Okay...'

He had not completely uttered the word when they heard a deafening clap of thunder at the peak in the northwest, and in a reflex they turned their heads towards the noise. They saw that the top of the old pine tree on the hilltop was radiating, and then lightning shot down from the heaven like a gigantic blue sword that cut right through the tree. Sparks flew in all directions while the poor old tree fell down into the river with a big splash, causing big waves.

Mr. and Mrs. Zhang were scared stiff. Today they witnessed the incredible and fearful power of nature, and they would never forget it for the rest of their lives.

'Look at that...'

Yuelan pulled at Mr. Zhang's sleeve, shivering. She wanted him to look at the river. Mr. Zhang pointed with his flashlight in the direction where his wife was looking at...

When the water had calmed down, they saw the large tree trunk floating on the water surface. Something was not quite right, because it should have been carried away by the strong current, but instead the big black object was calmly floating in their direction. Mr. Zhang waited for the thing to get near and then pointed at it with his flashlight. He and Yuelan both saw two things in the water that had the size of lamp bulbs and reflected the light. Then the thing started to move, and an immense monster rose up in a spurt of water. It had the thickness of a concrete pillar and it was covered with scales that looked like greenish glazed tiles. It was now standing upright in the water, towering above Mr. and Mrs. Zhang with half its body. What had looked like light bulbs, turned out to be its eyes. Mr. Zhang, who had studied biology for more than ten years, could not make out whether it was a dragon or a snake. He was frozen with fear and his entire body was shivering, his mouth hanging wide open but unable to utter a sound.

Then Mr. Zhang and the monster came face to face, and he could clearly see its expression. If snakes could smile, this one was certainly doing so.

It opened its mouth, and he could see the blood-red, forked tongue flicking between rows of white teeth...

Mr. Zhang forgot what had happened next. He only remembered hearing the sound of his head hitting the grass, the sound of the streaming water in the dark and trees billowing in the mountain wind. And also the delicate, unconcerned voice of a small child calling 'daddy'. He could hear that it was a boy.

[...]

That was in the summer of 1979, before Mr. Zhang became a father.

(2)

[Yang Ligong is sitting on the train with his mother and stepfather, Uncle Qiao, who is a brother of Yuelan. They are on their way to Yanjiang.]

'Here, Big Gong, have some apple!' Uncle Qiao had peeled an apple, and the white flesh smelled tempting.

Yang Ligong shook his head and said softly: ‘Uncle Qiao, just give it to mommy, I am not hungry.’

Yang Ligong was a lovely kid, neat, well mannered, obedient and calm. The more Qiao Yueming looked at him, the more he liked him. He smiled and said: ‘Big Gong, you’re such a good boy, I am sure that granny and grandpa will be delighted with you. If Little Wen could only be just a little bit more like you, then our whole family would be forever thankful to Buddha. You are so well mannered, while he is... Well, haha... You’ll know what I mean when you meet Little Wen.’

Talking about his nephew Little Wen, Qiao Yueming could not help laughing. Little Wen’s full name was Zhang Zhongwen, the son of his elder sister Qiao Yuelan. His sister had only got her beloved boy after five years of marriage, and he was therefore treasured by the whole family. But... At this point he could no longer suppress his laughter. He saw that Yang Ligong was feeling a bit down, and he said: ‘Big Gong, let me tell you a story. It is not just an ordinary story, it is something that really happened in my family!’

Yang Ligong’s mother was smiling as well. She guessed that Qiao Yueming was going to tell him the story that she had heard several times. She never really knew what to believe of it, but she warned: ‘Don’t scare him too much, he is not so brave.’

This remark really aroused Yang Ligong’s curiosity, and he said with big eyes: ‘Oh please, Uncle Qiao. Tell me the story.’

‘All right then. After all, you are going to live with my family, so you will get to know this sooner or later. It has to do with your cousin Little Wen. You know, our Little Wen is...’ At this point he intentionally paused for a moment, before saying in a solemn voice: ‘He is a reincarnated demon, a serpent spirit who has spent two thousand and three hundred years practicing Taoist skills. Because he once neglected his task to guard the course of the river, he caused a flood, and the Jade Emperor of Heaven punished him by sending him to earth as a human being. Where he ended up being the son of my sister!’

[...]

‘Oh, Big Gong, there is something else that you need to know about Little Wen. He really is a bit different from other kids. Forget about what Uncle Qiao has told you, he just wanted to scare you. He knows that you like stories, so he just made one up. You are a big boy, and when you stay with granny and grandpa Qiao you must be polite. You must be nice to the girls, your cousins Xiaomei and Xiaoru. And of course to Little Wen. I know that you are a good boy and that you will behave yourself.’ Yang Ligong’s mother was lecturing him. He just nodded, he knew he had no choice.

‘Especially to Little Wen. His grandparents have spoilt him ever since he was born, and he is very quick-tempered. Just let him have his way. If he bullies you, just let him be, don’t pay attention to it... Actually he is not all that bad, he is very bright. But there are three things that you should never bring up when talking to him, because then he could get very angry, and you really don’t want him to be angry with you. I mean, not just you, also your Uncle Qiao is careful not to infuriate him. Well, those things are: “demon”, “snake” and “shut up”. Neither should you say anything related to these things. You should especially be careful not to mention anything

bad about snakes, like snake hunting, eating snakes and so on...' Uncle Qiao said to him with a nervous expression on his face.

Yang Ligong was beginning to feel a bit annoyed. He thought: 'Again this Little Wen, it seems as if the whole family revolves around him. I bet he is a spoiled brat, a little emperor. I won't have any difficulties with him, I'll simply ignore him.' But of course he nodded like a good boy.

[...]

That was in the summer of 1986, before he became Little Wen's best friend.

Thus the two protagonists of the story are introduced. As already becomes clear in this first chapter, the author provides generous background information, and he likes to include side-stories that fit into the main plot – the biography of a boy named Little Wen, who has supernatural powers and, as we will learn later, happens to be gay – but which are in themselves often unrelated to homosexuality. Yet the story has become very popular and can be found on numerous websites that collect Comrade novels, where it is praised for its originality and the literary style of the author.

The novel consists of three parts. In the first part, we read how Little Wen and Yang Ligong become very close friends. This part of the story is set in and around the town of Yanjiang and is interspersed with more ghostly adventures, as is the case throughout the novel. By the end of part one, Little Wen has just finished secondary school, while Yang Ligong has already attended three years of university. The second part is dedicated to Little Wen's years as a student. On campus, Little Wen and Yang Ligong are living together and that is where their romance begins. They both enjoy the intimacy of their renewed relationship, though Yang Ligong finds it difficult to accept the homosexual aspect from a societal perspective. Sometimes, this leads to discord between him and Little Wen, who sees no objection in following their feelings which he thinks are innate. Yang Ligong's inclination towards 'socially desirable conduct' makes him comply with the affection that Little Wen's female cousin Xiaomei has developed for him. While their love story is unfolding in the background, we read how Little Wen witnesses another romance between two male fellow students, which could almost have been an independent story in the category *Campus Life*. In the third and last part of the novel, Little Wen has graduated and is working as a teacher at another university. When Yang Ligong goes abroad for a year, he proposes to Little Wen that they could be together again once he is back, and continue their happy life as they knew it from their time on campus. However, when he returns, he still pursues his more 'healthy' relationship with Xiaomei, eventually resulting in their marriage. Although Little Wen tries to

appear happy for them, Yang Ligong's choice to marry Xiaomei really hits him hard. In the concluding chapters, we read how Little Wen is wandering through mystical realms in trancelike dreams, overwhelmed by conflicting emotions. He wonders whether he should use his exceptional powers to change his destiny, which would mean the end of both his and Yang Ligong's earthly existence, or continue his life as a human being, with the benefit of knowing emotions such as hope and affection. His inward struggle is visualized through a dispute between his demonic, serpent-like self and Little Wen's human incarnation. Although the author does not explicitly provide the outcome of this battle, the ending of the story seems to suggest that Little Wen will choose to linger in the human world to explore the possibilities that might still await him.

It is hard to say which outlook on homosexuality the author advocates in his story. The two protagonists both have their own opinions on the issue, and although the result is that they are not together in the end, that doesn't seem to affect Little Wen to the extent that he loses all hope of finding love. Then there is the side-story between two of Little Wen's schoolmates, in which alternative viewpoints on homosexual relationships are presented. A conclusion as to the gist of the story as a whole could therefore only be that the way in which one deals with his homosexual feelings is different from person to person. Every individual will make his own choices with regard to lifestyle, depending on personality and circumstances. Although this is a more refined and balanced point of view than we have seen in earlier Comrade novels, getting across his personal view on homosexuality as a social issue seems not to have been the author's motivation for writing the story. It is clear that he has put much more effort into constructing an original and entertaining narrative than into simply delivering a story that neatly fits around a homosexual theme. This new perception of authorship is one of the key factors in the transition from second to third-generation Comrade novels.

The proposition that the increased attention to style and presentation, together with the introduction of more extensive and original plots, can be seen as a crucial turning point in the genre's overall development is supported by the fact that stories with these new characteristics have gained immense popularity among readers, stimulating more and more authors to write according to this new standard. With an increasing number of novels that reflect their author's literary aspirations, Internet sites that collect Comrade Literature have started to discriminate between established Comrade novels, which are valued for their

literary artistry, and stories written by amateurs. An increasing number of these websites now feature collected works of individual authors on their personal pages (专栏).

Although this new trend in Comrade Literature does certainly not mean the end of the numerous amateur contributions to BBS-s or websites, the appreciation for aesthetic writing has definitely had repercussions in that quarter as well. The following amateur story, which was posted anonymously, clearly shows all third-generation characteristics.

The Illusive Mind is about two boys who have known each other since secondary school and are now living in the same city where they attend different universities. The protagonist is the first-person narrator of the story, and his friend is referred to as Z. We learn that our protagonist is fond of the sea, which has played an important role in his choice to come to this coastal city to attend university. He often goes to the beach, alone, where he sits silently, looking out over the sea:

You could only vaguely see the contours of the mountain chain on the other side of the misty bay. It was the beginning of autumn, and the surface of the sea was serene. Brilliant sunlight, and only some cotton white clouds floating in the azure sky.

Even the tiny waves smashed to pieces when they reached the shore. But just before that, their bellies, yellow like orioles, would swell as if they had taken on all the unhappiness of the seaweeds.

On the swelling water, flickering spots of light reflected on the endless ripples. The arch of the horizon stretched out endlessly, as if it were a blue hoop, firmly holding the sea together. One moment a white wave would suddenly rise like a gigantic wing and the next moment it would disappear again with a spontaneous and refined dance, a hint of vitality.

With the rising tide, the waves would become higher and higher. The beach would silently give in to this assault and slowly shrivel. A shaft of light would slowly extend over the water surface, from west to east, like a folding fan that opened up. The face of the fan was rippled, and at the base of the fan the darkness of the mountains would blend in the dark green plane. The waves would roll incessantly, never surpassing the boundaries of the shores, and always obedient to the distant moon.

The story contains many detailed portrayals of seascapes, like this example, in which the author uses an amazingly rich vocabulary to describe the subtle nuances in colours, shapes, sounds and moods. Our protagonist never feels lonely when he is sitting at the seaside, but if he wants company, he usually goes to see Z. Although at this point of the story there is no reason to suspect that there are any other feelings than friendship between the two boys, we witness the following conversation when the narrator first takes us to Z's room:

‘You know that guy who sleeps in the bed below you? He was acting really funny. When I went to look for you, he was there alone. He said he was waiting for his girlfriend. But then he left before she ever arrived.’

‘He? Waiting for his girlfriend? I think it is more likely that he is running after her. He is chasing the prettiest girl in our university. Perhaps he was afraid that she would not pay attention to him anymore if she saw you.’ I don’t know how many times we had already made jokes in this fashion, but never with any result. As usual, he only smiled faintly.

I always thought that Z was too white and frail for a guy. He was exceptionally white, perhaps even sickly white, and seriously underweight for his age, though he didn’t look that skinny.

‘Don’t you have any plans, now that you are a twenty-year-old prey?’

I knew that Z was talking about having a girlfriend. I took a sip of my drink and said: ‘Me? You know me, I hardly speak seven sentences a week, who would like to be with someone like me?’

‘Someone like you,’ Z said with a shrewd smile. ‘You are the kind of guy who won’t take one step when you see a “No Entrance” sign. But there is no “No Entrance” sign on the door to love.’

‘What about you then?’

‘For me it’s different.’ That was all he had to say.

And perhaps it really was different for him.

The girl whom they mention is X, and our protagonist has the impression that she and her boyfriend have broken up. One morning, he finds her in a classroom where she has spent the night to avoid her ex-boyfriend. He promises her not to tell anybody.

When our protagonist is at Z’s place on another occasion, we read how he likes to look at Z’s body, and he even seems to have unspoken erotic fantasies. That night, they talk about their happy time in secondary school, and because they sit up very late, our protagonist spends the night with Z. In the early morning, Z suddenly tells our protagonist that he is in love with him. Our protagonist doesn’t know how to react, he feels very confused and asks for some time to think about this confession. Apparently he has fallen asleep after the incident, because the next thing he knows is that Z opens the curtains and by then it is already broad daylight. Z behaves as if nothing has happened, but our protagonist is still very puzzled. He really doesn’t know how to act. That day he thinks about different ways to deal with this new situation. He could stop seeing Z, which would mean losing his best friend. But then again, he could not possibly approve of Z’s feelings because he finds it abnormal for two boys to be in love with each other. He takes the afternoon off to go to the seaside.

When he is walking towards the beach, it starts to rain. He seeks shelter in a little pavilion that is standing in the park. He notices that he is not alone; a girl is also sitting on another bench in the pavilion. It is X. She says that she has specially come out to look at the rain. Our protagonist immediately understands her, because the boyfriend with whom she broke up is called Yu (雨), meaning 'rain'. After staring at the rain for some time, they start to feel cold. Our protagonist takes her to the apartment of a Japanese man whom he teaches Mandarin, and who has given him the key while he is in Japan for family business. Although he initially hopes that she will leave early so that he can think about Z's feelings, our protagonist suddenly realises that he is sitting there, with a beautiful girl, in an apartment that he can use at will. This is a chance to prove to himself and to Z that he is 'normal'. When X asks him if he has ever been in love with someone, he is unable to give her an unambiguous answer, which worries him a bit. In the evening she leaves, and our protagonist dreams the whole night about Z and their time together. In these memories, he discovers more and more clues indicating that their feelings for each other are perhaps more than just friendship. In the morning, he has reached the conclusion that he always thought of Z as the person with whom he would spend the rest of his life, but he had never interpreted his feelings as love. From that perspective, he sees no reason to reject him. He is going to tell Z that he still wants to be friends with him.

When our protagonist arrives at Z's dorm, he finds out that he is not there and a lock has been installed on the door. He leaves a note with the telephone number of the apartment in which he is staying. After going to his own dorm to pick up some things, he goes back to the apartment, where he finds X waiting for him in front of the building. He asks her in, because he wants to be there when Z calls. When X sees how anxious he is, she asks if he is perhaps waiting for a call from his girlfriend. Our protagonist tells her that this is not the case, but then he starts wondering whether or not he and Z could be called lovers. He says that X can sleep at his place, so that she doesn't have to spend the night in a classroom. Before he goes to sleep, Z finally calls and they plan to see each other the next morning. That night he dreams again about Z. When he wakes up in the middle of the night, he sees that X is sitting by the window, crying. He tries to comfort her, but she doesn't really seem to notice him and she eventually goes back to her bed.

The next morning, she doesn't mention the incident but she has made up her mind to go and see Yu, to straighten everything out. Our protagonist has also decided to tell Z that he loves him. When they meet, he takes Z for a walk to the sea. They come across a deserted bunker, and decide to go inside. After a while the darkness is so complete that they both

become frightened and they stumble back to the sunlight, firmly holding each other's hand. Our protagonist is thankful for the intense moment, and he confidently takes Z back to the apartment. When Z gives him a beautiful pen, he uses it to write the words 'I love you'. He is a bit disappointed when Z doesn't give any sign of understanding. Before our protagonist can think about his next move, the Japanese man calls to tell him that he will be away for at least twenty more days. Z immediately suggests that our protagonist can seize the opportunity to ask a girl to stay at his place, and he adds his suspicion that X might be interested in him. Our protagonist is completely at a loss as to what might have caused Z's attitude to change so abruptly. But when they prepare for the night, Z suddenly refers to that morning in his room. He says that our protagonist was probably having a nightmare the other night, because he suddenly started to toss and turn, moaning and mumbling. Our protagonist feels as if he were struck by lightning. Was it all a dream? Wasn't Z in love with him? But even if it was all just a dream, he cannot deny the love that he is now feeling for Z. Which leaves him with another problem: how to tell Z?

He spends the next day reflecting on the situation. He doesn't know whether he should express his feelings to Z, or if he should just follow Z's advice and see how he and X will get along. He writes a love letter that he wants to send to both of them, but in the end he decides that this would make things even more complicated. At a loss what to do, he goes to the sea. Standing on a cliff, he thinks about throwing the pen that Z gave him in the sea below him. However, he cannot find the courage. This is where the story ends, and we don't learn what has become of our protagonist and Z, or X.

The story deals mainly with the protagonist's internal struggle of identifying and accepting his homosexual feelings for Z. The plot of the story, with the sudden realization at the end that Z's confession was merely a dream, allows readers to understand the protagonist's subconscious desires. If Z's declaration of love were a product of the protagonist's own imagination, then it might reflect a situation that he had secretly hoped for. The dream makes him suddenly aware of his latent affection, after which he has to give it a place in his conscious perception of life. When the protagonist discovers that his mind has deluded him, there is no way to deny his feelings any longer and the next step would be to decide whether or not to tell Z. A plot like this one, in which dreams can tell the story of a person's suppressed nature, fits into the third-generation tradition – in contradiction to novels of the second generation, which tend to be straightforward in presenting all crucial elements, including the facts that determine the characters' actions and the readers' conclusions. As to

the style of *The Illusive Mind*, we see that the author has put much effort into using poetical language, especially in his descriptions of sceneries.

The last story that we will look at in this category, *Hyperbolic Love*, is a special case. Of all the novels that I have discussed in this analysis, it is the only one that has been published in print,⁴¹ and is therefore available to a broader (or at least more diverse) readership through bookshops and libraries. What makes the book interesting for a general audience is that the theme is actually not homosexuality, but ‘Internet culture’. In that respect, it is a good example of a novel in which homosexuality has been reduced to a sub-theme. What made it interesting for the publisher is that it is written by a young and talented author, who has graduated from the renowned Peking University and has the ambition of becoming an acclaimed writer. However, a digital copy of the book soon found its way to many websites that collect Comrade Literature, and we will see that the climax of the novel has everything to do with homosexuality.

The story describes several characters who don’t know each other, but who often visit the same BBS-s and chat rooms where they communicate. We sometimes learn something about the characters’ personal lives, but most of the time we merely witness the conversations that they have through the Internet. Between the chapters we can read the actual messages that the characters have posted on the discussion forums, or the e-mails that they have sent each other. The two main characters in the book call themselves Fenhou and Wang Qihua on the Internet, and the story mainly focuses on their conversations and discussion, on which other users on the forum comment as well. They talk about many different things, including observations from their daily lives, but also their opinions on issues such as history, politics and ethics. What is interesting about this book is that it indirectly provides a lot of information about Internet culture, including both technical aspects as well as customs that are related to ‘Netizenship’ and this particular form of communication, which is very intimate and yet impersonal at the same time. Perhaps the most precise formulation of the novel’s theme would be: the sadness of electronic communication.

We learn that Fenhou is a young man, somewhere in his early twenties, who assumes that Wang Qihua is a girl (judging from the Internet alias). They either comment on each other’s BBS postings or exchange e-mails on a daily basis, and for Fenhou, Wang Qihua is the person with whom he can talk about everything that is on his mind. At a certain point, he

⁴¹ 《双曲线•LOVE》（爱之网丛书；面具系列小说）/ 莫须有 著. 长沙：湖南文艺出版社，2001. ISBN 7-5404-2660-8.

would like to meet Wang Qihua in person, but she only agrees to make an appointment on a certain day and time in an Internet café called ‘Hyperbola’ without actually revealing themselves. In a chat session after their ‘mystery date’ in the Internet café, Wang Qihua brings up the topic of homosexuality. Fenhou’s opinion on the issue is rather stereotypical and prejudiced. He rejects homosexuality as something ‘dirty’. However, Wang Qihua seems to be much more tolerant and tries to effect a change in Fenhou’s attitude as well.

By the end of the story, Fenhou’s feelings for Wang Qihua have developed into genuine affection, even though they have never met. But then he reads one posting by Wang Qihua entitled *Narcissus in the Mirror*, in which he recognizes a detailed description of his own appearance. At first he is confused, and then he feels anger. He is convinced that Wang Qihua must be an acquaintance who has fooled him all the time. In their next chat session, Fenhou demands an explanation. Wang Qihua tells him that they actually don’t know each other, but when they were in the ‘Hyperbola’ Internet café, Fenhou was so obviously looking around to see if he could find Wang Qihua, that it was not hard to guess that he must be Fenhou. After hearing this, Fenhou apologizes for his rash judgment, and he confesses to Wang Qihua that he has fallen in love with her. But then Wang Qihua tells him that he shouldn’t fall in love, as he is a man, and not a woman as Fenhou had guessed. He tells Fenhou that he is the owner of ‘Hyperbola’, and that he was the one who brought him coffee and opened the door for him when he left that day.

After this conversation, Fenhou is extremely confused. He concludes that he has already fallen in love with Wang Qihua, no matter if it is a man or a woman, even though he had always loathed homosexuality. He decides that he wants to tell him this, but he does not get the chance. When he goes back to the Internet café, he finds out that it has been sold, and after some days he only receives a farewell letter from Wang Qihua. Here are some parts from this letter:

Dear Fenhou,

If you don’t mind, I’ll just address you as Fenhou, and not use your real name Li Xiaowan.

This is the last time that I contact you. After today, we’ll just forget about everything that has happened.

I have two reasons for writing this letter. I want to tell you something about myself, and at the same time clarify some issues that have come up in our contact.

Wang Qihua is just an Internet alias, Fenhou. The person you know is called Wang Qihua, what he is called in real life doesn’t matter here. But the Wang Qihua online is very similar to the person offline. The story of Wang Qihua is also my own story. This is what you wanted to

know all the time, but which I never really could tell you. Now I've made up my mind: I will tell you, because you have the right to know.

An ordinary person who has lived for more than twenty years, has already experienced so much that you could fill a bunch of novels with it. I am very sensitive, and more perceptive than the people around me. Perhaps I've also experienced more. Anyhow, it would be too much to tell in an orderly way. So I will here only describe how I have become a 'comrade'. You are not very familiar with the homosexual community, so I should explain that we call each other 'comrade', a somewhat derisive form of address. Homosexual men are called 'male comrades'. [He describes how he grew up as the youngest of five siblings. When he is in the third grade of primary school, their cousin comes to live with them because his mother has died. He is one year older than Wang Qihua, and they sleep together in one bed. At night, they often have sexual intercourse but when they are seventeen and eighteen years old, his cousin falls in love with a girl. Wang Qihua is very sad, because he is really in love with him. During his time at university, he is always thinking of him. In his fourth year, he is raped by a taxi driver. Although this time the sexual contact was not of his own free will, he discovers that he somehow still enjoyed the intimacy with the man, and he concludes that he is not just in love with his cousin, but that he is gay. During his last year in university, he seeks contact with the gay scene in Beijing.]

It was a sad community. The feelings that these people have, including myself, are not morally wrong in themselves, but the discrimination by society is very obvious. This discrimination does not only exist in China, but also among the masses in other countries. That is why they often live under deplorable conditions.

Consequently, a lot of them become reckless and unrestrained. They make love in the most hideous places, no matter with whom, or they sell their body. They often don't have any ties with anybody and they don't care about emotions. I had never imagined it would be like this.

The intolerance of society towards gay people cannot be helped. But in my opinion, it is wrong to use that as an excuse for moral decline.

[...]

All these years I have longed for true love, to be loved by a man. Even though it may violate a social taboo, I do have the right to search for this love.

Love doesn't have any boundaries. Only because our ancestors were so preoccupied with the continuation of their lineage, love has been defined as something between a man and a woman. Mankind needs the union between men and women to produce offspring. But it is not reasonable to discriminate between homosexual and heterosexual love, and even 'comrade' as a form of address, although commonly used, is not very sensible. Every rational human being would consider the person with whom he/she wants to share the rest of his/her life as a lover, apart from parents or children. Concepts like 'homosexuality' or 'comrade' are problematic, just as 'Women's Day', because they imply a distinction between mainstream and subculture, between centre and margin, which indicates that the people who use these expressions are not rational, that their thinking is confused.

However, the masses are ignorant, they don't understand tradition and are not used to pondering over these issues, which makes them hasty in judging and even intrusive. People cannot be blamed for being ignorant, but jumping to conclusions without thinking, leading to violence and impulsive actions, is really a sign of backwardness. A lot of people who fall in love with someone of the same sex are very well educated, they are familiar with ethics, history and tradition, and they are aware of psychological issues. When they decide to have a love affair with someone of the same sex, after a process of careful consideration, they deserve the same respect as heterosexuals.

[...]

I know that I'm not in love with you, Fenhou. Not because you didn't study at Peking University – no matter what educational background you have, I think you are more cultured and smarter than many of the people who went to Peking University. Neither because you were scornful about homosexual love, I know that was just a first emotional reaction. The bottom line is that I don't love your fervour, your emotional way of thinking. I am especially afraid of your fervour, as it can easily bring destruction.

This doesn't mean that I reject you. But my personal experiences have caused me to grow old before my time, and compared to you I'm really too old. You are young, and being too close to someone like me would be harmful to you. Mental age can only increase through personal experience, you can't rush things with enthusiasm.

Especially under these circumstances, in a society that is still not tolerant enough, you should not decide too hastily to take this road. I would urge you to pursue heterosexual love. If you can find a girl who really matches you, nobody will put you under any pressure and nobody will try to obstruct your life. You will receive everybody's blessings because you have chosen to abide by the generally accepted rules. The human instinct is to go after profit and stay away from harm, so if you have a choice, you should cause no trouble for yourself.

[He concludes by saying that he has deleted his e-mail account and that he will move to Canada within a month.]

The letter leaves Fenhou with mixed feelings. He is still in love with Wang Qihua and he feels frustrated because this love has now become impossible. It has all happened very suddenly and there is still a lot that he doesn't understand, about his own feelings and about Wang Qihua's motives. But what does become clear now is why the Internet café was called 'Hyperbola' – and why the novel is called *Hyperbolic Love*:

He must have named his Internet café 'Hyperbola' because he believed that people are like two points on a hyperbola, only able to look at each other and communicate from a distance. They could get very close, even infinitely close, but they would never meet, because the fate of a hyperbola is that the two curves have no points of intersection. And every attempted approach is destined to be very short, since the points on both curves are incessantly on the move. Even

when they manage to get aligned, they will soon move away from their positions because they can't stop running.

After this chapter, in which Fenhou is abandoned to his fate, there is only one more chapter in which one of the other characters prepares to go abroad to continue her studies overseas. The part in which Wang Qihua reveals his identity, confronting Fenhou with the nature of his feelings, only covers twenty-five pages out of a total of 266. If we start counting from the part in which they first start talking about homosexuality, the issue would cover approximately fifty pages. However, homosexuality turns out to play a crucial role in the denouement of the story's plot, and the ideas on the issue that are presented in Wang Qihua's exposition are progressive. It also contains a sharp indictment of the general view on homosexuality by Chinese society, using words such as 'ignorance' and 'backwardness'. The story suggests that there is no fundamental difference between heterosexual and homosexual love, which is supported by the fact that the issue only plays a role when Fenhou starts to develop amorous intentions, and by his realization afterwards that he has fallen in love with Wang Qihua as a person, and not as someone of the opposite (or the same) sex. Wang Qihua's advice to Fenhou not to choose lightly for this lifestyle is motivated by the need for (self-)protection, as the lack of tolerance in Chinese society will certainly cause trouble. It must be liberating for many Chinese gay people to see that such opinions are now beginning to make their way into 'regular' novels. Together with the fact that the author of this novel was not a stranger in the online gay community to begin with,⁴² it explains why this novel has retroactively become part of the online corpus of Comrade Literature.

With this story, I have come to the end of my analysis of the genre's development as a product of the Chinese homosexual subculture in its Web-based, virtual environment. In the final part of this thesis, I will try to further indicate the significance of the genre in reflecting the growing self-awareness of the subculture as related to mainstream society, and the role that the genre has played – or may yet play – in bringing the issue to the attention of the general public.

⁴² This was first pointed out to me by some members of Chinese gay chat rooms and discussion boards, and later confirmed to me by the author. Mo Xuyou (莫须有) is his pseudonym, and he has suggested *sub rosa* that other novels on other themes might be published under his real name.

III: CONCLUSION

The genre of Comrade Literature has evolved significantly in the course of time, from the first published story in 1996 up until the most recent examples in this thesis, from 2001 - 2003. Meanwhile, the number of stories has of course continued to grow, but there have been no new leaps in the development of the genre such as in the transition from First to Second, and from Second to Third Generation. In the last decade, the Internet has become available to more and more people, and with an expanding online gay community the number of Comrade authors has risen considerably. However, many stories that fail to enthrall their increasingly critical public with artistic ingenuity rapidly sink into oblivion amidst the abundance of acclaimed 'fine works' that have accumulated over the years. In retrospect we could say that the period covered in this thesis has been the genre's formative, experimental phase. Now, however, the divergence of two strands of development seems imminent: a continued tradition of the type of Comrade Literature in its Web-based context that we have seen in this thesis on the one hand, being 'homemade' publications as one particular form of communication within the online gay community, and a more ambitious, new form of Comrade Literature that aims at a less specific audience, as we can see from some of the more recent examples, on the other. This is closely related to changing social conditions in the PRC, partly reflected in the stories I have discussed, but it is also a result of growing self-awareness within the Chinese gay subculture, in which the online community has played an important role.

Public awareness

In a country that is developing as rapidly as China, ten years is a significant period of time. The last decade in the PRC has been marked by tremendous economic growth, and the rise of consumerism has given a new impulse to individualism. Especially for the younger generation in urban China, brands and fashion have become as important as in any 'capitalist' Western metropolis, whereas merely one generation ago minimalism used to be the uniform standard. This individualism is, for example, expressed in the increasingly diverse artistic traditions that have developed in China since the reforms after the Cultural Revolution, but also in the social sciences, where notions of the 'individual' have become less uniform and interchangeable, and more – indeed – individualistic. Individualism is no longer automatically conceived as a threat to society, which has offered new perspectives for alternative lifestyles.

With regard to homosexuality, most Chinese publications in the 1990s tend to follow the course of Li Yinhe's *Their World* in terms of its unbiased approach.⁴³ In 1992, the year that *Their World* was published, a sociological study by Liu Dalin revealed that 7.5% of the interviewed university students had had some kind of sexual experience with somebody of the same sex.⁴⁴ Although Liu understandably assumes that only part of this figure should be attributed to 'genuine homosexual feelings', the importance lies in the fact that he does not condemn the possible existence of these feelings as such. He notes that homosexuality is 'a sensitive issue' in Chinese society, often leading to suppression and denial. However, he refers to extensive foreign research indicating that statistically 3-4% of all people might have a homosexual tendency, and he adds that more research on the issue must be done in China.

As a matter of fact, there has been an increase in studies on homosexuality in subsequent years. The issue even received attention from the Chinese government, after it had reluctantly admitted that the worldwide spread of AIDS also affected China. A study from 1995, involving government initiative to assess the risks of an AIDS epidemic, involved a survey among 700 gay men who frequented gay meeting places in Beijing, Tianjin, Nanjing and Chongqing.⁴⁵ The study gives a detailed insight in the respondents' sexual behaviour, as well as some other interesting statistics. Almost 75% of the respondents are under 31, almost 25% are married and 23% of the men have children. Although the author does not specifically mention this, it is safe to assume that most of the married men are over 30, and all of them indicate that they felt pressured to marry by society and their families. Almost 50% of the respondents have had higher education, 33% are working as Communist Party cadres and an additional 21% have jobs that require 'above-average' intellectual skills. The survey shows that many respondents often have sexual intercourse with different (extramarital) partners. The author argues that this is partly stimulated by the fact that Chinese society does not provide space for long-lasting same-sex relationships to develop. The survey also reveals that although most men are aware of the risks of unsafe sex, more than half of them have never used a condom, a situation that might well be improved through government information campaigns. In his conclusion, the author indicates that the idea of treating homosexuals as

⁴³ A good example of a study from a conventional, socialist point of view is: 安云凤 (An Yunfeng) [et al.]: 《性伦理学》 (*Sexual Theory*). 北京: 首都师范大学出版社, 1996 (pp. 251-253). However, such conventional views are rather exceptional in the 1990s and are therefore not discussed here.

⁴⁴ 刘达临 (Liu Dalin): 《中国当代性文化—中国两万例“性文明”调查报告》 (*Contemporary Chinese Sexuality: Results of a "Sexual Awareness" Survey Performed among 20,000 Chinese Respondents*). 上海: 三联书店, 1992 (pp. 201-207, 399-400).

⁴⁵ 潘绥铭 (Pan Suiming): 《中国性现状: 性、个人修养、社会现实》 (*The Present Condition of Sexuality in China: Sex, Personal Development and Social Reality*). 北京: 光明日报出版社, 1995 (pp. 410-436).

mental patients should be discarded, because none of the medical therapies have proven to be effective. His advice is that more efforts should be made to close the gap between mainstream society and the long ignored social group of homosexuals, and to provide candid information on health issues concerning homosexual lovemaking.

In 1998, Li Yinhe published *The Homosexual Subculture*.⁴⁶ For this book she apparently did not perform supplementary research since it is basically an expanded version of *Their World*. However, the additions are significant because they contain a more articulate plea for social acceptance of homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle. Two paragraphs in the chapter “Marital Life” are a case in point:

We believe that the wish to marry is natural: humans need somebody by their side. For gay men, the wish to marry is also natural. But more often than not, it is not right for them to marry a woman, and it would in fact be more sensible to marry a man. We know that for some women the sexual preference of their husband doesn't matter, because they don't see sexual intimacy as an essential part of their life. Perhaps these women even fancy having a homosexual husband. But there are not so many women like that, and it would often be a better choice for gay men not to marry, or to marry their boyfriend.

It needs no further argument that the majority of society is heterosexual. It is therefore understandable that homosexuals, who are a minority, feel that society is prejudiced and that part of our common practice is not applicable to them. That leaves them with two options. The first one is to make an appeal to society and demand reasonable conditions for their social group; the other option is to shift their difficulties on to other people who are ignorant and not to blame. Homosexuals demanding legal forms of cohabitation or even the right to marry would be the first option; hiding one's sexual tendency and marrying a woman would be the latter. We believe that only the first option is desirable and should be supported. The other option is undesirable and should be avoided.

Although such a radical change in attitude might be hard to accomplish, the climate in China does seem to become milder: the deletion of ‘hooliganism’ from the Criminal Law in 1997 is generally seen as the decriminalisation of homosexuality.⁴⁷

By the late 1990s, most sociologists point out that the existence of a Chinese homosexual subculture can no longer be ignored. Some publications stress health issues, mainly with regard to the spread of AIDS, but they also increasingly underline the socio-cultural aspect. International figures and additional Chinese research indicate that 2-4% of all people are (latently) homosexual, which would mean that there are at least 24 million gay

⁴⁶ 李银河 (Li Yinhe): 《同性恋亚文化》 (*The Homosexual Subculture*). 北京: 今日中国出版社, 1998.

⁴⁷ 谈大正, 1998 (p. 317). See note 9 on page 3.

people living in China. The general view in scholarly publications is that this group deserves legal protection in order to enhance their quality of life.

The same trend is visible in popular magazines. Two articles in the May 2000 issue of *Huasheng Monthly* give a detailed account of the situation of gay people in China.⁴⁸ The authors argue that homosexuality should no longer be a taboo in Chinese public discourse, and they refer to China's ancient tradition of tolerance towards same-sex love. They seem to support scholarly adhortations to improve the social situation of gay people, by implying that tolerance is an essential characteristic of a civilized country that is playing an increasingly important role in the international community. It is probably partly due to this same international awareness that homosexuality was no longer mentioned as a 'mental disorder' (病态心理) in the Third Edition of the *Chinese Standards on Classification and Diagnosis of Mental Disturbances* (中国精神障碍分类与诊断标准) that came into effect on 20 April 2001. Many Chinese sociologists praise the decision, and Li Yinhe even speaks of 'social progress'.⁴⁹

Comrade Literature, subculture and self-awareness

If we look at the fifteen Comrade novels against the background of these social changes, it helps us to better understand some of the genre's developments. The discouraging outlook for gay people in the early 1990s is reflected in the violent endings of first-generation novels, as the authors don't see any perspective for their characters to develop a long and happy life together. The idealized love stories themselves are not meant to present a truthful image of gay life in China, but rather serve as a temporary refuge from reality. Even straightforward sex scenes seem to be romanticized as they take place in luxurious hotel rooms, villas or at home, and not at secret meeting places or in public toilets.

As the online gay community develops, it soon becomes the ideal meeting place that can be accessed at any time from behind a computer. Although there are no statistics to support this theory, it is safe to assume that the number of gay visitors to public parks has dropped drastically with the rise of the Internet. Discussion boards are the ideal place to share experiences and exchange views, while chat rooms provide the possibility to communicate in a direct way and meet friends, or make amorous dates. Comrade novels of the second

⁴⁸ 邓梅芳 (Deng Meifang) & 荣维毅 (Rong Weiyi): "中国同性恋人群新调查" (A New Research on Homosexuals in China) and 荣子 (Rong Zi): "同性恋聚会见闻录" (Eyewitness Report of a Homosexual Gathering). 《华声月报》 (*Huasheng Monthly*) 5:2002 (pp.36-47).

⁴⁹ 郑淑华 (Deng Shuhua) & 田利平 (Tian Liping): "同性恋非精神病" (Homosexuality Is Not a Mental Disease). 《北京青年报》 (*Beijing Youth Daily*) 12 March 2001 (p. 4).

generation clearly show the influence of this online community on the genre. The online discourse reveals what issues are important to Chinese gay people, and also, to some extent, what kind of people are behind the nicknames. Being an extension of this online discourse, themes and settings of the stories consequently become more recognizable to gay readers. On the other hand, we also find incidental or very obvious references to this online community within the stories.

One theme that occurs in numerous novels is the struggle of being both a homosexual in China *and* a good son. It is presented as a dilemma between rational and emotional motives, more specifically: between living up to social expectations and pursuing personal happiness. The moral factor that plays a key role is filial piety. More than once, characters in the stories express their hope that one day Chinese attitudes towards homosexual relationships will be more liberal. As we have seen, the scholarly world has already started to raise questions on this issue, conveying their concern about forced marriages. To create a more tolerant environment they suggest for the authorities to start with legal reform, officially acknowledge homosexual relationships, and inform the public in a better, unbiased way. Although much work remains in this field, we sense a decrease in worries about the issue of marriage in the Comrade novels.

This could partly be explained by the fact that a growing amount of the stories are set on university campuses. This reflects that an increasing number of Internet users in China are students, as many dormitories are equipped with LAN Internet connections, in addition to computer facilities in libraries etcetera. And if the campus does not provide adequate Internet access or if the dormitory does not offer sufficient privacy, there are many Internet cafés where the students can go. Looking at Chinese gay websites it is obvious that the largest (or at least the most visible) group of users are under 30 years of age and that many of them are students. Living on campus, the students are relatively independent, and with their parents at a convenient distance they have the opportunity to explore their sexuality. As we can read in some of the stories, they meet other gay students on a (university) BBS or in a chat room.

That the online community is often incidentally mentioned in second-generation Comrade novels indicates that the phenomenon is presumed to be known among the readers. This is not surprising in itself, as the novels are published and read within that same community. However, the relevance of this online 'hide-out' becomes clear when it is discussed at more length in the stories. What we can gather from the information presented by the authors is that there are certain 'rules of conduct' and even a specific 'jargon' within the gay scene, which are derived from its Web-based community. We have seen examples of

reference to certain websites to establish whether someone is gay, and the spoken use of coded language that was originally invented to avoid offensive language in chat rooms. What I found especially striking in my observations of the gay scene in Beijing is that when people go out together, they usually still address each other by their Internet nicknames, even when their real names are no longer a secret.

It is clear that the online discourse has had a strong normative influence on the emerging gay subculture as a social group. Since the Web-based community has become the place where gay people meet, they now have a shared background in terms of knowledge and information, and thus the online community has been a bonding factor toward the formation of a cohesive group. Now, Chinese gay people are increasingly aware of the fact that their numbers are large, and that they face similar problems. Social developments and scholarly publications are closely watched on gay websites, and discussed on related BBS-s. The Chinese gay community feels strengthened by the support and has slowly emerged from its 'underground' hiding place. Especially in larger cities, openly gay bars are no longer an uncommon phenomenon, and even transvestites defy the stares of inquisitive bystanders as they roam the streets of Beijing. It is obvious that the self-awareness of gay people has grown significantly over the past few years, and in a society that has already embraced many new forms of individualism, the call for recognition of a gay lifestyle sounds ever more clearly.

The Internet and other media

In third-generation Comrade novels, the theme of homosexuality is treated in a matter-of-fact way, and becomes subordinate to a larger theme or an overall plot. This may be the result of increased self-awareness within the subculture, as homosexuality per se is no longer the predominant issue. However, we have also seen examples in which the author makes a statement to the general public, pleading for tolerant attitudes towards homosexuality. At the same time, these novels become more attractive to a general audience because of their artistic quality, and because the stories do not solely revolve around a theme that is perhaps interesting to a very specific readership only. Some authors of third-generation Comrade novels seem to have the ambition to become acclaimed writers, i.e. entering into a mainstream tradition. In their perception, writing about homosexuality or being a homosexual author will not prevent them from having a successful literary career. And in the changing circumstances in today's China, it is by no means unthinkable that they are right.

We have seen one example of a novel that is both an 'official' publication *and* considered to be part of the Comrade tradition. The importance of this development is that

published novels are available in bookstores and libraries, thus making them accessible to a larger audience and not limiting their presentation to the online community. In that form, Comrade Literature could play a part in broadening public awareness with regard to the gay subculture.

So far, cinema has also played an important role in this respect. In 2001, Hong Kong director Stanley Kwan (關錦鵬) released the movie *Lan Yu* (藍宇), adapted from the Comrade novel *A Story from Beijing*. It won several Golden Horse Awards (the ‘Taiwanese Oscars’), including the ones for Best Director and Best Actor. The movie was shot with PRC actors on location in Beijing, without first consulting the Chinese authorities. Although this usually means that permission for distribution or screening is very unlikely, the movie’s success did not go unnoticed. In December 2001, the Student Film Association at Peking University (北京大学) was allowed to organize ‘China’s First Gay Film Festival’ (中国首届同性恋电影节), and the major attraction was *Lan Yu*. Another Chinese gay movie on the programme that had never had a public screening before was *East Palace, West Palace* (东宫·西宫, 1997) directed by Zhang Yuan (张元). The story and script for this film were written by Wang Xiaobo (Li Yinhe’s husband), who had already published several novels – not related to homosexuality.⁵⁰ However, as this movie had been an independent production as well, it was blacklisted by Chinese authorities. Zhang Yuan’s passport was even confiscated in order to prevent him from going to the 1997 Film Festival in Cannes where *East Palace, West Palace* was shown. The fact that the movie was eventually screened at the Film Festival in Beijing was an indication that homosexuality was beginning to be regarded as less controversial by 2001. And although university officials ordered a premature ending to the Film Festival, following unforeseen media attention, the event was a signal of change in itself. In a week’s time, it attracted large numbers of visitors and the initiative was praised in local and international newspapers.⁵¹ Another, long-lasting effect of the festival is that both *Lan Yu* and *East Palace, West Palace* are now for sale in China’s innumerable video shops. Trends toward recognition and tolerance may be confirmed and indeed enhanced by the Second Chinese Gay Film Festival, featuring approximately 40 long and short Chinese-language movies and planned for spring or summer 2005, in Beijing.⁵²

⁵⁰ Wang’s story was first published in 1998 as “似水柔情” (Tender Feelings) in a posthumous collection: 《地久天长: 王小波小说剧本集》 (*Forever and Ever: Collection of Novels and Scripts by Wang Xiaobo*). 长春: 时代文艺出版社, 1998 (pp. 242-282). Scripts for film and stage are also included in the collection (pp. 285-362).

⁵¹ For example in 《北京青年报》 (*China Youth Daily*) and the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*.

⁵² Announcement on <http://fanhall.com/show.aspx?id=5289&cid=6> (2 February 2005).

I conclude that the development of Comrade Literature reflects the different stages in the formation of a distinct, self-aware homosexual subculture in the PRC. We have seen touching, comforting, instructive, encouraging and enticing examples from an underground tradition that primarily emerged as an exceptional means to communicate, not to impress. However, some recent novels show the potential to become part of the mainstream tradition. As such, Comrade Literature could further contribute to the dialogue between Chinese society and gay subculture.

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- Other websites referred to in this thesis
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These are the fifteen stories discussed in my thesis, arranged alphabetically by author. I will indicate from which website I have collected each story and on which date. In one case the URL is unknown, because the story was sent to me by someone through e-mail. Please note that all stories have been published (earlier) on other websites as well, and that dates of first publication are often inaccurate. Versions of the stories as I used them for this analysis can be found on: <http://www.sino.uni-heidelberg.de/dachs/leiden/tongzhi/rvc.html>.

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