

Homotextualizing *Niezi*: From Sinful Sons to Crystal Boys

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Introduction

The year was 1990. Gay Sunshine Press, one of the oldest publishing houses of varied gay materials in the United States, published the English translation of a Taiwanese novel titled *Niezi* 孽子 [*Sinful Sons*]. The novel, written by the modernist author Pai Hsien-yung¹ and translated by Howard Goldblatt as *Crystal Boys*, became such a sensation among Anglophone American readers that the publisher later put out a paperback edition. Blatantly marketed as “[t]he first modern Asian gay novel” (Pai, *Crystal Boys* front cover), the paperback edition features on its cover a half-naked jock in jeans against a dark chartreuse backdrop. Such marketing schticks—highlighting the theme of queer erotics and picking a cover image that looks like a 1990s Calvin Klein advertisement—attracted a large number of queer readers who were curious about cultural uniqueness and universal experience of being gay. Yet, little did they know that when the original novel first came out in 1983, it was not even considered by mainstream Taiwanese critics and readers as gay-themed fiction.

In this paper, I will investigate the homotextualization and canonization of *Niezi*, with an emphasis on the shaping force of translation on the reading and reception of Pai’s novel. By synthesizing a select few representative pieces of scholarship on *Niezi* published in the 1980s, I will demonstrate the connection between early critics’ evasive interpretations of queer motifs in *Niezi* and Taiwan’s conservative sociocultural milieu. Next, I will present a historicized, comparative reading of Pai’s original work and its English translation *Crystal Boys*, with special attention to paratexts, the reconfiguration of untranslatables in the English translation, and the politics of anglicizing non-European, non-normative sexual landscapes. I argue that translation added to the complex production of meanings, facilitated the interactions between the text, the critic, the reader, and the author, and contributed to the queer iconization of *Niezi*.

Niezi: A Gay Novel?

Initially serialized in *Xiandai wenxue* 現代文學 [*Modern Literature*] since 1977 and later published in its entirety in 1983, *Niezi* tells the story of a community of rent boys² based in Taipei’s New Park and their interactions with patrons and clients in the 1970s. A-qing, the young narrator of the novel, who

¹ In this paper, I use Wade-Giles for most of the Taiwanese names in Mandarin Chinese, except when another preferred spelling exists. The ordering of names in Mandarin Chinese follows their conventional form: family name first, followed by given name.

² A rent boy refers primarily to a male prostitute who is young and working-class.

was expelled from school for homosexual behaviour with a chemistry lab supervisor and therefore banished by his father, ends up in New Park, where he befriends Mousey, Wu Min, and Little Jade, and works as a rent boy under the guardianship of Chief Yang. Interweaved with A-qing's coming-of-age narrative are Mousey's frequent misdemeanours, Wu Min's complicated relationships with his patrons, Little Jade's search for his father, and the legendary tale of Dragon Prince and Phoenix Boy told by Grandpa Guo. Since the 1990s, *Niezi* has been celebrated as one of the most popularized and canonical gay-themed literary texts from Taiwan (Guo 1055-1056; Martin 54; Huang 113). Not only has the novel been adapted into a 1986 film, a 2003 TV series, and numerous theatrical performances, it has also had a "transformative impact on the formation of 'gay' consciousness and the imagination of same-sex identities" (Guo 1055) in Sinophone communities.

The issue of male homosexuality, however, never became a focal point for scholars and critics in the first few years after the novel was published. As Fran Martin points out, it was due to the notoriety of homosexual relations during Taiwan's martial law period that *Niezi* was not interpreted as primarily a gay novel (57). Within a few years after the publication of *Niezi*, there were already several book reviews and articles—written by well-known authors or literary critics—on the novel. In one way or another, they tended to de-sexualize and de-homotexualize Pai's text. For example, in T'sai Yüan-huang's 1983 essay "*Niezi* erchongzou" 「孽子二重奏」 ["Duet in *Niezi*"], the literary critic refuses to consider *Niezi* as a gay novel, nor is he willing to acknowledge the centrality of homosexuality in the fictional work. Moreover, his stance toward non-normative sexualities, like that of the many Taiwanese readers who were affected by the anti-homosexual journalistic discourse of the 1960s and 70s, is fairly hostile. Throughout his essay, T'sai goes into detail about how A-qing deviates from being a filial son and even asserts that restoring a proper father-son relationship, which is in accordance with Confucian filiality, is of critical importance to stop A-qing from being a homosexual (81-84).

If T'sai attempts to de-homosexualize the protagonist in *Niezi* by reading the novel as a tale of moral caution, then Lung Ying-t'ai, an eminent Taiwanese author, aims to de-homotexualize Pai's entire text—rather candidly. In her 1985 essay "Tao zhepan jinsha: Xi ping Pai Hsien-yung *Niezi*" 淘這盤金沙——細評白先勇「孽子」 ["Sifting Gold from Sand: A Detailed Analysis of Pai Hsien-yung's *Niezi*"], Lung states as many as four times in merely two paragraphs that *Niezi* is not a gay novel at all:

Homosexuality is not discussed in this novel (I agree with Yüan Tse-nan's argument) [...] The representation of homosexuality in this book is shallower than skin deep [...] This book does

not discuss homosexuality at all [...] *Niezi* is not a homosexual novel, although the author seems to wish it were.³ (9-11, my translation)

In her piece of criticism, Lung offers her reasoning of a non-queer reading. First, homosexuality in the novel, according to Lung, is merely a replaceable, auxiliary element to the plot line (10). Second, Lung believes that the novel does not put enough emphasis on the characters' self-reflections about their non-normative sexualities. As far as she is concerned, the novel fails to display a continuum of affects, like humiliation, guilt, self-doubt, and disdain, which are usually associated with marginalized members in the gay community.

Despite early critics' de-homosexualized and de-homotextualized readings, Pai Hsien-yung never responded to those critiques in the first few years after the novel came out. The silence might be due to his partial disentanglement from the Taiwanese academia, as he remained in the United States as a college professor after earning an MA degree from the University of Iowa in 1965. However, as the fervour of public interest in homosexuality continued to grow in Taiwan, *Niezi* sparked more and more (re)interpretations and appropriations. Finally in 1986, Pai Hsien-yung spoke up for the very first time about his own work by publishing an essay titled "Xie gei A-qing de yifeng xin" 寫給阿青的一封信 ["A Letter to A-Qing"] in *Renjian* [*The World*], a left-wing Taiwanese magazine. Pai's essay could be seen as the author's official response to both the progressively heated discussions of male homosexuality and the anti-homosexual appropriation of his novel. First and foremost, he rebuts the de-sexualized and de-homotextualized readings by referring to gay love as the central motif of the novel. The reason why A-qing faces an insurmountable struggle and depression is neither because he is an unfilial son, nor that he is involved in crimes like drug dealing or prostitution; it is A-qing's own unwillingness—out of fear or shame—to acknowledge same-sex love and homosexuality that puts him in an emotional quagmire. Moreover, with that same level of compassion toward anguished gay teenagers, Pai addresses the issues of accepting one's sexuality and fighting against homophobia by making observations about gay activism in the United States. He points out that "[t]hose who participated in anti-homophobia campaigns [in New York City] did not mean to seek sympathy or privilege; they were merely looking for social justice" (Pai, *Di liu zhi* 60, my translation).⁴ Not only does the author refute the conservatives' view that advocating non-normative sexualities in Taiwan could lead to poisoning the society (Huang 117), he also attempts to connect Taiwanese queers and their hassling history with American queers and theirs, thus creating an intercultural notion of queerness.

³ The Chinese text reads: 它倒也不是一本探討同性戀的作品（這一點，我同意袁文的說法）。[...] 就同性戀而言，這本書其實只觸到不痛不癢的皮毛。[...] 這本書並沒有探討同性戀這個題目。[...] 「孽子」，不是一本探討同性戀的小說，儘管白先勇似乎希望它是。

⁴ The Chinese text reads: 那些參加運動的人，並不是向社會呼籲同情，更不是爭取特權，他們只是向社會討公道。

***Crystal Boys*: A Gay Novel!**

The English translation of *Niezi*, known as *Crystal Boys*, was first published in 1990 by Gay Sunshine Press, a publishing house specializing in gay erotica and popular culture. According to its founder Winston Leyland, Gay Sunshine Press, together with its eponymous magazine, aimed to provide “a cornucopia of gay history, sex, politics and culture [...] a flavorful ambrosia for gay readers starved for images of themselves” (Kirtley). In addition to publishing essays, fiction, and poetry by such figures as William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, and Tennessee Williams, Gay Sunshine was also known for introducing gay literatures from other cultures to the United States. It has published Brazilian novelist Adolfo Caminha’s *Bom-Crioulo*, translated into English as *Bom-Crioulo: The Black Man and the Cabin Boy* by Edward A. Lacey, and several region-specific anthologies of gay fiction, which include stories from Russia, Japan, and Latin America. Thus, it was not unanticipated that *Niezi*, a book depicting Taiwanese gay subculture and stirring up discussions about homosexuality, would stand out and be selected by Gay Sunshine to be added to its list of publications.

Eroticizing *Niezi* Through Paratexts

The paratext is defined by Gérard Genette as “a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations” that accompany a literary work (1). Following Genette’s line of inquiry, yet positioning literary productions in a cross-border, translational framework, Valerie Pellatt regards the paratext as any materials that are appended to the core text and have functions of “explaining, defining, instructing, or supporting, adding background information, or the relevant opinions and attitudes” (1) of fellow authors, readers, translators, publishers, and reviewers. As is recently summarized by Kathryn Batchelor, paratexts allow readers and scholars to not only formulate a clearer picture of the transnational travel of a literary text, but also understand how a text is transformed by sociocultural conditions of production (27-31). In order to answer the question—How was *Niezi* homotextualized in the English translation?—I will start with a comparison between the cover of the original and that of the English translation.

Published by Yuanjing in 1983, the first edition of *Niezi* features on its front cover a rather impressionistic image by then celebrated Taiwanese painter Ku Fu-sheng. Against a navy-blue backdrop is a grayish-white shape that slightly resembles a twisted human body. By merely looking at the cover art, it is fairly challenging to tell what the novel is really about, not to mention whether or not it is gay-themed. Yet, it was not the publisher, but Pai Hsien-yung himself who decided to obscure the subject matter of his novel by choosing a replica of Ku’s painting on the book cover. In one of his interviews, Pai reveals that he was not satisfied with the cover art selected by his editor; in the end, he picked one of Ku’s paintings, because it materialized solitude, portrayed people’s devastated mindset, and vividly represented the world created in *Niezi* (“Ku Fu-sheng”). On the surface, Pai’s decision could be interpreted as a self-censoring act, in that during the martial law period, freedom of speech was limited, and the social milieu was highly conservative after all. However, I suggest that Pai

intended to politicize, instead of eroticizing, the construction of sexuality and community in 1970s and 80s Taiwan. If we re-examine the author's 1986 article and the concurrent mainstream discourse about homosexuality, it is clear that the fictional events in *Niesi* have strong historical links with identity and body politics—heated debates on prostitution, gay cruising, homosexual identification—in Taiwan. Thus, an abstract painting that blurs subjectivities and boundaries exhibits more effectively the shifting politics and discursive landscape. That said, the de-eroticized cover does seem to justify the views of some early critics, such as Lung Ying-t'ai, who argue that homosexuality should not be treated as a *leitmotif* of the novel (Martin 63).

In contrast to the original text, *Crystal Boys* was marketed in the United States for its gay credentials as “[t]he first modern Asian gay novel” (Pai, *Crystal Boys* front cover). Although this particular book blurb did not appear on the cover of the lesser known 1990 hardcover English edition, Gay Sunshine selected a pastel drawing by a Singaporean gay artist named Tan Peng to foreground the queer themes in Pai's novel. The cover image depicts a twink-type⁵ Asian man in a half-open white shirt exposing his chest and shoulders. Despite the fact that it merely offers an overgeneralized, if not fetishized, portrayal of a rent boy in New Park, it could be considered as a passable attempt to represent the major characters in *Crystal Boys*. Meanwhile, the cover would undoubtedly appeal to certain Anglophone gay readers of the time who had a penchant for slender, young boys. Compared to its predecessor, the 1995 paperback edition features a much more daring design. As I have briefly described in the introduction, on the cover of the paperback English edition, there is a half-naked Asian jock in jeans against a dark chartreuse backdrop. Such an image unabashedly highlights the subject matter of the novel, reflects the publisher's agenda, and corresponds to the pro-sex libertarianism⁶ that started to emerge in the United States during the 1980s. First, the image of a ripped body could allow the target reader—most of whom identified as gay—to easily associate the English translation with numerous gay erotic novels and short story collections published during the 1970s and 80s. By looking at the cover, which resembles those of Boyd McDonald's chapbooks, a reader of the 1990s would immediately recognize that *Crystal Boys* was a gay novel. I would also like to point out that, by picking an image of a jock with a dark chartreuse backdrop, Gay Sunshine might have also intended to represent the protagonist A-qing in a more accurate way and confirm from the very beginning that he is a gay character. Although Pai does not describe in detail what the protagonist looks like in the novel, we can tell from A-qing's brief encounters with Dragon Prince that the protagonist “ha[s] nice broad shoulders” (Pai, *Crystal Boys* 32) and is “a healthy looking specimen” (Pai, *Crystal Boys* 199). Not only are these features captured by the jock image, the dark chartreuse backdrop also alludes to A-qing's name, as *qing* 青 happens to be a particular shade of green in Mandarin Chinese.

⁵ A twink usually refers to a thin, smooth-skinned, young gay man.

⁶ In her seminal essay “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” Gayle Rubin observes that there were three positions dominating the sex wars in the US feminism during the 1980s. Anti-sex authoritarianism—or known as the conservative tradition—promoted opposition to pornography, prostitution, homosexuality, and all erotic variation. Pro-sex libertarianism—or known as the pro-sex tradition—defended the rights of erotic nonconformists and produced an exciting and innovative discourse of sexual pleasure and erotic justice. The moderate position held the belief that the truth about sexual epistemology lied somewhere between the two extremes (173-176).

Second, the Asian jock in jeans epitomizes a combination of racial representation and the American gay archetype. The latter, according to Hal Fischer, is a derivative of the cowboy archetype and can be recognized by “articles of clothing, cowboy or western boots, jeans, flannel shirts, and in some instances hats” (18). Altogether, the image itself—a rather hybrid representation—may reflect Gay Sunshine’s aim, which is to publish translations that “portray the cultural uniqueness as well as the universal experience of being gay” (Kirtley). Third, putting such an explicit illustration of the human body on the cover also directly challenged the anti-sex authoritarianism of the 1980s by aligning with the mass marketing of erotic male images of the 1990s. The English edition, an outgrowth of the movement of sexualization in the 90s, became a queer space that counteracted the heteronormative culture of carnality and intimacy (Berlant and Warner 561-564).

As my paratextual analysis reveals, Gay Sunshine made *Crystal Boys* distinguishable from *Niezi* by selecting a highly sensual image to replace the original cover image and adding suggestive book blurbs to the 1995 paperback edition. Besides that, the translator Howard Goldblatt and the author Pai Hsien-yung also took part in the homotextualization of *Niezi* and the making of *Crystal Boys*. I will explicate the complex dynamics between the translator, the author, and the gay communities in the United States and Taiwan in the next two sections through textual analysis.

Reconfiguring the Untranslatable

Emerging at a pivotal juncture when Taipei was gradually becoming more open to Western ideas, *Niezi* acutely captures the changing Taiwanese imagining of same-sex relations and desires, and creates a fictional space that illustrates the real-life contestation between past models and new expressions. Permeating in Pai’s text is an assortment of discursive terms referring to homosexuality or same-sex behaviours, including local epithets, translated terms, and archaic expressions for homoeroticism. For instance, in the following passage, which is likely inspired by news coverage on male prostitution in Taiwan in the 1960s and 70s, Pai skillfully fictionalizes the concomitance of homosexual and homoerotic tropes:

如果讀者從金天堡隔壁的一道窄門走下去，便會進入這個別有洞天的妖窟裏 [...] 有的倒是 一羣玉面朱唇巧笑倩兮的「人妖」。筆者無意間發現了本市的男色大本營，一時眼花撩亂，心蕩神搖，幾疑置身事外「桃」源 [...] 據云來這裡吃禁果（分桃）的人，上至富商巨賈，醫生律師，下至店員夥計，士兵學生，九流三教，同「病」相憐。（Pai, *Niezi* 342, my emphasis)

I am not going to provide my or Goldblatt’s translation here, as I will conduct a meticulous comparative analysis of the original text and the English version later in this section. Yet, I would like to draw attention to a couple of expressions in emphasis. Some—for instance, the local epithet *renyao* 人妖 [a human-like monster]—indicate a category of personhood. Some—such as the translated term

chi jinguo 吃禁果 [to eat the forbidden fruit] and the archaic expression *fenta* 分桃 [to share the peach]—describe (homo)sexual acts. The juxtaposition of discursive terms adds to the complexity of the world that Pai’s novel creates. Meanwhile, it poses a tremendous challenge to the translator, who needs to reconfigure untranslatables and present them to his 1990s readership.

In Pai’s novel, the two most-frequently used Mandarin terms referring to homosexual identification are *renyao* and *boli* 玻璃, both of which are derogatory local epithets that do not seem to have equivalents in English due to their cultural uniqueness. *Renyao*, which literally means a human-like monster or a human-like demon, entered the gay-bashing discourse for its connotation of disrupting the natural balance, or more specifically, the Taoist binaries of human and demon, masculinity and femininity, and *yin* [the feminine; the negative] and *yang* [the masculine; the positive] (Chiang 206). As is suggested by the description in the fictional news coverage above—“一羣玉面朱唇巧笑倩兮的「人妖」 [a group of giggling *renyao* with powdered faces and rouged lips]” (Pai, *Niezi* 342, my translation)—the pejorative tone of the term *renyao* does not actually lie in the rejection of same-sex activities between men, but in the reverse gender persona that some gay men assume. Such rejection and the fear underlying it are best manifested in the following passage, in which Pai repeats *renyao* five times in a row and lays them out stylistically:

在嗡嗡營營的笑語聲中，有兩個字在這琥珀燈光照得夕霧濛濛的地下室內一直跳來跳去，從這個角落跳躍到那個角落，從那個角落又跳蹦蹦的滾了回來。

人妖

人妖

人妖

人妖

人妖 (Pai, *Niezi* 344-345, my emphasis)

In *Crystal Boys*, Howard Goldblatt keeps the layout of Pai’s text and renders the passage as follows:

In the midst of the raucous laughter a constant refrain echoed throughout the misty amber-colored basement, from one corner to the other, and back again.

Fairies

Fairies

Fairies

Fairies

Fairies (Pai, *Crystal Boys* 285, my emphasis)

Apparently, Goldblatt does not offer a “thick translation” (Appiah 817) by giving the propositional meaning of *renyao* and providing his readers with annotations or glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural context. Instead, he uses “fairy,” a Euro-American queer term that originated in turn-of-the-century New York City. Although Goldblatt has been constantly criticized for straying from the original or getting too creative with words, this seemingly domesticating rendition was, in fact, finalized after multiple attempts and meticulous consideration. In several interviews, Goldblatt has made it clear that translation is a service primarily for the reader and not for the writer. However, when translating *Niezi*, he actually contacted and worked with Pai Hsien-yung, who was at that time a professor at UC Santa Barbara. In addition, since Goldblatt was not familiar with some of the gay terms, he even “visited a gay bar in San Francisco and asked the patrons for help” (Levitt). So, even though *renyao* and “fairy” do not seem to have much in common when compared, I would argue that Goldblatt’s reader-oriented English translation not only gets the meaning across, but also brings to the fore non-normative conceptions of the human body and sexuality. “Fairy” rose to its prominence at the beginning of the twentieth century and has become one of the most commonly used queer slangs—in both derogatory and self-referential senses. According to historian George Chauncey, it offers men and boys an alternative paradigm through which they can “make sense of vague feelings of sexual and gender difference” (49), in that by taking on the role of fairy, they are able to “reject the kind of masculinity prescribed for them by the dominant culture” (50). Challenging the hegemonic tenets concerning gender order, both *renyao* and “fairy” were once deemed as semiotic markers of stigmatization by the heteronormative cultural regime. In this sense, in the translated excerpt that I have shown earlier, the repetitive use of “fairies” would allow Anglophone gay readers to associate with the main characters and see their own real lives reflected in a Taiwanese novel. Meanwhile, both expressions have also been turned into self-referential terms by members of the queer community, as they proudly construct their alternative public personas. Such commonality might account for Goldblatt’s consistent translation of *renyao*—and its variant (*yaojing* (妖)精 [evil spirit; demon])—as “fairy” or “fairies” on other occasions. For instance, after Cozy Nest—the underground gay club—is maliciously exposed by journalists, Little Jade appropriates the stigmatized term *renyao* and turns discrimination into a frolicsome parody:

「好吧、好吧，就算我是狐狸精，」小玉拍胸口道，「那麼你是耗子精，你是兔子精。」 [...] 小玉說着卻把老鼠手中的筷子搶了過來，一邊噹噹的敲着碗，一遍用着幼稚園的歌「兩隻老虎」的調子唱道：

四個人妖

四個人妖

一般高

一般高

一個沒有卵椒

一個沒有卵泡

真奇妙

真奇妙 (Pai, *Niezi* 351-352; my emphasis)

And here is Goldblatt's English translation:

"Okay, okay, then I'm a fox *fairy*," Little Jade said as he thumped his chest. "You're a rat *fairy*. And you," he pointed at Wu Min, "You're a rabbit *fairy*" [...] Little Jade snatched Mousey's chopsticks out of his hand, banged them against the side of his bowl, and sang the children's song "Two Little Tigers" with new words:

Four little *fairies*

Four little *fairies*

All the same height

All the same height

This one has no pecker

This one has no nuts

Isn't that weird

Isn't that weird. (Pai, *Crystal Boys* 289-290, my emphasis)

Reflected in this example is Little Jade's parodic use of *jing* and *renyao*. And since the English term "fairy" connotes the gendering of the human body and the politics of using effeminacy as a cultural strategy, the translation further confirms Little Jade's homosexual identification by foregrounding the symbolic deviation from the heteronormative society.

Besides *renyao*, another term that has been considered as an untranslatable is *boli*. Unlike *renyao*, the root for this queer expression is dubious. A commonly accepted explanation is that *boli* used to be an argotic term for buttocks in Taiwanese Hokkien, which was later appropriated to describe anal sex between gay men (Kuo). Since the 1970s, it has been used as a derogatory metonym for the gay community in Taiwan and its non-heterosexual association. However, I postulate that *boli* might be a mistranslation of the English word "flit." To a Chinese ear, "flit," a slang word in the 1950s to refer to a homosexual, could sound very similar to "frit," which refers to a mixture that is used to make glass. Hence, "frit" was mistaken to be a jargon word for homosexuality and was then translated into Taiwanese Mandarin as *boli*. But whatever origin the word has, *boli* appears as frequently as *renyao* in the novel when a character is referring to the homosexual rent boys. For example, in a campy conversation between Moon Beauty and A-qing, the former jokingly scolds: "玻璃鬼！玻璃鬼！你和玉仔兩人死了，一定也變成玻璃鬼。你活着是甚麼貨，死了也是甚麼貨，想改也改不了" (Pai, *Niezi* 38, my emphasis). In *Crystal Boys*, the excerpt is translated by Howard Goldblatt as "Crystal ghost! [...] You'll be a crystal ghost! That's exactly what you and Jade will turn into when you die. Whatever you are on earth you turn into the same thing after you die, and there's no way to change

it” (Pai, *Crystal Boys* 44-45, my emphasis). In the translator’s note, Goldblatt does not reveal whether or not he ever looked into the debate around *boli*’s origin. However, he does provide his readers with a clarificatory statement that “[in] Taiwan, the gay community is known as the *boliquan*, literally ‘glass community,’ while the individuals are referred to as ‘glass boys.’ The term ‘crystal boy’ has been used in this translation” (Goldblatt 7). Based on what he says in the note, it is clear that Goldblatt believes that the semiotic sign *boli* is critical for Anglophone readers to get to know and understand the cultural specificities of the Taiwanese gay community. Furthermore, the explanatory note demonstrates that, although he could have translated *boli* literally into English as “glass,” the published rendition *crystal* might be finalized out of stylistic concerns.

The controversy over Goldblatt’s use of “crystal,” however, does not lie in his foreignized rendition. Instead, it is his choice to change the title of Pai’s novel from *Niezi* to *Crystal Boys* that raised eyebrows. Andrea Bachner, for instance, contends that the English title “downplays the novel’s focus on male filiation” (80). As I have illustrated earlier, *niezi*, which literally means “sinful sons,” alludes to both a structure of karmic retribution—the sins of the parents are repaid by the moral corruption of their offspring—and a culture-specific reference to the disruption of the heteropatriarchal structure of Sinophone society. These implications, according to Bachner, are removed from the English title (80). In a similar vein, Flair Donglai Shi points out that Pai uses “the *nie-xiao* [filial] dichotomy” to reflect the dialectical relationship between homosexual identification and the family (138). The English title, however, elides that interpretative association. In spite of the scholars’ critiques, both of which are justified, I argue that Goldblatt’s choice of the title for his translation underlines and complicates the commodification of *Niezi* in the United States. The title *Crystal Boys* underscores the novel’s gay subject matter, which has already been highlighted by the cover, the book blurb, and the translator’s note. Furthermore, it creates a tantalizing mixture of a shared gay identity and an unknown queer experience. By anglicizing *Niezi* and opening up the Euro-American gay literary canon, Goldblatt’s translation both acknowledges and challenges the notion of American Gay.

Reconstructing Homosocial/Homosexual Spaces

Along with linguistic untranslatables, the queer spaces—particularly New Park—portrayed in Pai’s novel deserve critical attention. Despite the proliferation of literary and cultural scholarship centering on *Niezi*, analyses of the cultural implications of the urban queer spaces in the novel have been largely absent. Fran Martin’s 2003 monograph remains one of the few voices in the desert. In her book, Martin contends that, *Niezi* should be read as both a canonical *tongzhi*⁷ fiction and a “foundational classic of [...] urban history” (47). When examining the discursive and geographic sites of New Park, a real-life public space in Taipei featured in Pai’s novel, Martin argues that New Park’s queerness lies not only in its iconic status as an old-time cruising area for gay males in Taipei, but, more importantly, in its instability and multiplicity of representations.

⁷ Written as 同志 in Chinese script, it is one of the Mandarin translations of the term “queer.”

In *Niezi*, Pai's delineation of New Park is daedal and prismatic. At the beginning of the novel, we are presented with a messy, cramped, and slightly dilapidated urban space that much resembles its real-life counterpart. According to Martin's archival research, Taipei's New Park used to be "a rather worn-looking oasis of shady old trees, curving pathways and rustic benches, [...] encircled by an old iron stake fence, [...] occup[ying] a smallish city block" (48). Its many physical features are accurately depicted by Pai in the opening paragraph of Book Two:

說起我們王國的疆域，其實狹小得可憐，長不過兩三百公尺，寬不過百把公尺 [...] 我們國土的邊緣，都栽着一些重重疊疊，糾纏不清的熱帶樹叢：綠珊瑚、麵包樹，一棵棵老得鬚髮零落的棕櫚 [...] 一圈緊密的圍籬，把我們的王國遮掩起來 [...] 叢林外的播音臺那邊，那架喧囂的擴音機，經常送過來，外面世界一些聳人聽聞的消息。

Speaking of the territory of our kingdom, it was pitifully small: no more than three hundred meters in length and a hundred meters in width [...] On the border of our kingdom were planted some shady, interweaving tropical trees: milk bushes, bread-fruit trees, and old, withered palm trees [...] A tightly woven fence surrounded and hid our kingdom [...] That loudspeaker beyond the trees constantly broadcasted sensational news from the outside world. (Pai, *Niezi* 3, my translation)

As we can tell from the excerpt above, which serves as an etic account in spite of the use of the first-person plural pronoun "our," New Park is an adumbral, dusty, and semi-deserted place. In it, different social relations, which are metaphorically represented by the entanglement of tropical trees, appear to cohabit peacefully and be mutually intelligible. Such multiple sociality is further elaborated later in the novel, where Pai reveals that New Park is frequented by chess-playing retirees and Tai Chi practitioners in the day and cruising gay men at night. The following passage, for instance, describes a steamy summer night in New Park:

公園裏的樹木，熱得都在冒煙。那些棕櫚、綠珊瑚、大王椰，一叢叢鬱鬱蒸蒸，頂上罩著一層熱霧 [...] 人站在石階上，身上給熱氣熏得暖烘烘、癢麻麻的 [...] 夜空的一角，一團肥圓的大月亮，低低浮在椰樹頂上，昏紅昏紅的，好像一隻發著猩紅熱的大肉球。

The trees in the park were so overheated that they started to emit steam. The shady palm trees, milk bushes, and coconut trees were enveloped in steamy air [...] The hot air *warmed and tickled* the people standing on the stone steps [...] In a corner of the sky, a fat, round moon was hanging slightly above the coconut trees. It *looked like a giant, feverish, dark red meatball*. (Pai, *Niezi* 5-6, my translation and emphasis)

In contrast to the opening paragraph of Book Two, this extract, told from an emic perspective, is hyper-sensual and even erotic. Through a plethora of visual and tactile sensations, Pai transforms the day-time New Park, which is mundane and decaying, into a nightly homosocial/homosexual hub that is steamy and invigorating. Pai's prismatic narrative does not create disparities. Instead, it demonstrates the complexity of New Park as both a discursive and a geographic site where the waning nationalistic ideology and queer subculturality are enmeshed.

Howard Goldblatt's rendition of Pai's portrayal of New Park, however, not only fails to fully capture the subtle eroticism, but also flattens the connotative power of the author's queer voice. The following passage is the English translation of the second excerpt I showed earlier:

The trees in the park were so overheated they steamed. A blanket of steamy hot air hung over the stands of palm, green coral, and coconut trees [...] The heat rising from the steps was so intense that people standing on them grew *lightheaded* and *numb* [...] Off in the corner of the sky a full moon hung above the coconut trees, *the deep red color of a chunk of fetid, steamy raw meat*. (Pai, *Crystal Boys* 19, my emphasis)

Goldblatt's version does not entirely convey the carnal overtone in the original text. For instance, the two phrases *nuan hong hong* 暖烘烘 [comfortably warm] and *yang ma ma* 癢麻麻 [tickling and tingling] that the author uses to hint at the hyper-sensuality of New Park at night are translated respectively as "lightheaded" and "numb." In both cases, Goldblatt seems to attempt to recreate the two-fold effect of Pai's descriptions. However, he misinterprets the connotative meanings of the two expressions. *Nuan hong hong*—which can be translated literally as "comfortably warm"—could sometimes be associated with *shang tou* 上頭 [dizziness] when one is describing a person who is unable to think clearly or move steadily after drinking alcohol. In such a case, "lightheaded" works perfectly as an English equivalent. But, in the excerpt above, such a warm feeling should be understood as a somatosensory representation, euphemistically referring to *yubuo zhong shao* 慾火中燒 [to burn with lust]. Thus, the English translation "lightheaded" fails to convey the masked concupiscence in the original text. A closer and more nuanced rendition could be "hot to trot." As for *yang ma ma*, which means "tickling and tingling," the translator appears to follow the same line as how he interprets *nuan hong hong*. Ignoring the veiled carnality in *Niezi*, Goldblatt only focuses on the second half of the phrase *ma ma* [insensitive] and overlooks the key part *yang* [tickling; itchy]. Just like one of its English counterparts "itchy," *yang* not only could mean "to have an itch on one's skin," but also could carry the more voluptuous meaning of "to have a restless (sexual) desire." Another noticeable disparity between the original text and the English translation lies in the appearance of the moon. Pai's description—好像一隻發著猩紅熱的大肉球 [It looked like a giant, feverish, dark red meatball]—inherits the connotative power of the two somatosensory terms above, as it draws a highly covert analogy between the moon and a testicle. In doing so, the author effectively builds up the prurience of the gay cruising space without vulgarizing his work. Compared to Pai's narrative, Goldblatt's

translation paints a morbid picture of the nightly New Park, because the translator reduces the queer text's drifting nature to "a unidimensional and superficial game of denotative equivalence" (Démont 157). By translating 一隻發著猩紅熱的大肉球 as "the deep red color of a chunk of fetid, steamy raw meat," Goldblatt fixates on the propositional meanings of *xing* 腥 [gamy; rancid], *hong* 紅 [red], and *re* 熱 [hot; steamy] and fails to recognize the testicular reference, thus turning the sensual and slightly bawdy innuendo into a pathological and nauseating allusion. Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that the English translation does not completely eradicate the lubricity—camouflaged or not—that the author meticulously integrates into his novel. For instance, by translating *renu* 熱霧 [hot mist] as "steamy hot air," Goldblatt manages to extend the plasticity of Pai's text, in that the word "steamy" functions as a *double entendre*, referring to both the weather and the lascivious gay cruising scene in New Park at night.

Goldblatt's interpretative violence to New Park—reflected in his "minoritizing translation" (Démont 162)—reduces the visual and tactile sensations in Pai's novel, even though the translator might be attempting to provide his Anglophone readers with a gay site that is different from the American one. But in fact, the queer traits of both the real-life New Park and the fictional one are manifested not only in the disruption of the social organization of public spaces in Taipei, but also in a discernible resemblance to their American counterparts, such as Bryant Park and Central Park in New York City or Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. According to Martin, New Park used to serve a homosocial function as well as a homosexual one in the 1970s. Back then, gay men's activities could be roughly divided into five categories of "people-watching, meeting up with friends, getting to know new *tongzhi* friends, cruising for sex, and having sex" (Martin 54). In Pai's novel, New Park provides young male hustlers like A-qing and Wu Min, who have been banished from home by their parents, with an entry point into the rest of the gay world in Taipei. It also functions as a queer site of social and sexual rendezvous, a Central Park-ish place where gay men could "meet others like themselves and find collective support for their rejection of the sexual and gender roles prescribed them" (Chauncy 204-205). The polyvalent nature of New Park is ingeniously displayed by Pai's prismatic portrayal in *Niezi*. Although the novel is not best known for explicit sex scenes and unapologetic illustration of non-normative sexualities, Taiwanese queer readers can easily connect to Pai's narrative, which is laden with veiled carnality. Since layers of meaning abound in the original text, its literary quality resides in the capacity to accommodate *double entendres*. Thus, it is regrettable that Goldblatt's English translation seems to transform, if not suppress, the multivalued force of Pai's narrative into a fixed and fetishized form.

Conclusion

The publication, reception, and translation of *Niezi* bore witness to the changing patterns of interpretation and commodification of queer-themed texts within Taiwan as well as from the Sinophone world to the United States. Pai's novel, which "plot[s] homotextualities from a Taiwanese

perspective” (Bachner 84), grew out of a particular sociohistorical node where heteronormative episteme—popularized in the Sinosphere as a result of the introduction of classical sexology at the beginning of the twentieth century—was buttressed by the nationalist agitprop of the Kuomintang.⁸ Under the binary constructions of filiality and gender roles, homosexual identification was pathologized and persecuted as a dangerous identity. In this light, early critics were prone to sidestep the queer motifs in *Niezi* or even criticize the novel from an anti-homosexual stance. Later, due to the advent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Taiwan in 1985 and the introduction of Euro-American queer theory and activism after the lifting of the martial law, public discourses about homosexuality started to proliferate and diversify at an unprecedented rate, which sequentially inspired more variegated (re)interpretations of *Niezi* and other queer narratives. Even Pai Hsien-yung himself wrote an essay to defend the relational ties between the rent boys of New Park in his novel and gay men in real-life Taipei against the essentializing and stigmatizing forces imposed by the heteronormative society. In addition to that, the late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed several new readings of *Niezi* that highlight the author’s humanistic compassion for queer communities, the release of a feature film based on Pai’s novel, a *tongzhi*-themed special issue of *Zhongwai wenxue* 中外文學 [*Chung Wai Literary Monthly*], and the publication of *Crystal Boys*, Howard Goldblatt’s English translation of *Niezi*. Controversial as Goldblatt’s translation is, it demonstrates the potential to bring a different take on queerness to the Anglophone context, as the translator now and then complicates the epistemological entanglements regarding knowledge production about sexual difference. Nonetheless, a queering mode of translation requires an aesthetic and political consistency in (re)producing the network of connotative associations.

⁸ In the 1970s and 80s, the Kuomintang (KMT)—also known as the Nationalist Party, was the ruling political party in Taiwan.

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