

Radiant Reflections: Crystal Boys, Rose Boy, and Taiwan's Queer History

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Abstract: “The essay delves into Taiwan's queer history through the lens of two pivotal events: the "Rose Boy" Incident and the publication of the groundbreaking novel, *Crystal Boys*. It explores the interconnectedness of these events and their lasting impact on Taiwanese society's perception of LGBT individuals. *Crystal Boys*, authored by Pai Hsien-yung in the repressive era of martial law, dared to depict the lives of gay men in Taipei's New Park, challenging societal norms and censorship. The New Park emerged as both a refuge and a perilous space for the gay community, where they formed bonds amidst societal oppression. The essay also discusses the subsequent activism sparked by *Crystal Boys*, leading to milestones like the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan. Conversely, the tragic death of Ye Yongzhi, dubbed the "Rose Boy," exposed the harsh realities faced by LGBT youth in Taiwan, igniting societal outrage and calls for change. Through literary analysis and historical context, the essay illustrates how art and activism intersect to shape queer narratives and propel the fight for equality in Taiwan and beyond.”.

Keywords: “Queer, Taiwan, *Crystal Boys*, Rose Boy”.

1. Introduction

When his body was discovered, it was a hot and stuffy morning. Just after music class ended, a group of children rushed into the boys' restroom and discovered Ye Yongzhi struggling on the ground, crawling. A scream opened up Taiwan's shocking “Rose Boy” Incident. On April 20, 2000, at 11 o'clock in the morning, Ye Yongzhi, who was only attending junior high school, was found lying in a pool of blood in the school restroom with fatal injuries. According to Yongzhi's mother, they had been "feminine" since childhood and had been inspected by his classmates for his genitals at school, to the point where he was too afraid to go to the restroom by themselves. Their death caused great concern in Taiwanese society. The Yongzhi incident was only 20 years after the publication of the novel *Crystal Boys*, a milestone in Taiwan's queer history.

Crystal Boys is widely considered the first gay novel in Taiwan's history. It was written by the renowned Taiwanese author Pai Hsien-yung and published in 1983. The novel tells the story of a group of gay men living in 1970s Taipei who hang out in the famous "New Park," where gay boys and other queer people meet to avoid discriminations and explore their struggles with identity, relationships, and societal expectations. When *Crystal Boys* was written, Taiwan was under martial law, and there was strict censorship that restricted any discussion of homosexuality in the media. Despite this, Pai Hsien-yung was determined to write an honest portrayal of the lives of gay men in Taiwan and set New Park as a stage, drawing on his own experiences and the experiences of those around him.

The publication of *Crystal Boys* was the first time that homosexuality had been discussed openly in Taiwanese literature, and it helped to pave the way for greater acceptance of queer people in Taiwanese society. One specific part of *Crystal Boys* that is significant in its interpretation of the queer past is the depiction of the "New Park," a popular gathering spot for gay men in Taipei during the 1970s. The New Park was where gay men could meet and socialize,

forming relationships and building a community in a society that largely shunned and oppressed them. The main character, A Qing, described New Park: "In our kingdom, there is only darkness and no daylight. As soon as the day breaks, our kingdom disappears because it is an extremely illegal country. We have no government, no constitution, no recognition, and no respect. All we have is a group of common citizens" (Pai, 17). In A Qing's eyes, the New Park was their haven, a safe space in the darkness. They struggled in the darkness and longed for protection. In such a suffocating social context, gathering in the New Park at night was the only chance to catch their breath. Some people poured out their physical desires here, while others gained money through sex work. They are also struggling to survive, searching for sunlight in this territory.

In the novel, the New Park is portrayed as a place of hope and danger for the gay men who frequent it. On the one hand, it allows them to connect with others who share their experiences and desires. On the other hand, it is also a place where they are at risk of being exposed to violence and harassment from both the police and anti-gay gangs. "The one thing that we denizen of the park never talk about is our family backgrounds. And even if we do, we don't say much, since every one of us has his private anguish that can never be told to anyone" (Pai, 86). At this stage, the gay community in the New Park still struggles for survival. In the limitation of political identity and the state of shame of one's homosexuality, literary critic Hans Tao-Ming Huang argues that "this is a specific mode of oppression about male prostitution" (Huang, *Queer Politics and Sexual Modernity in Taiwan*, 113)[1]. He explained the possibility of gay men being equated with sex work by the government, which is a kind of oppression of gay men. However, the novel also shows the creative ways gay men found to connect and build a community in a hostile environment in the 1970s. It also highlights the dangers and risks that they faced in their pursuit of love and acceptance. But after 1995, the Taipei government tried to erase New Park from history. *Crystal Boys'* description of the gay gathering in New Park was not only

reclaimed as a piece of gay history for its portrayal of the gay men's sex work subculture that existed in the New Park area during the 1970s, but the park also became a place of identification where the term "queer" was adopted as a means of expressing a new form of homosexual consciousness regarding gender and sexuality.

The novel spurred the formation of the lesbian organization "Between Us" in 1990, followed by the establishment of the "LGBT Section" at the Golden Horse Film Festival in 1992. In 1995, the "New Park Incident" occurred when a group of LGBT activists held a public gathering in New Park to protest against police harassment and discrimination. The incident led to a pride parade called "Rainbow, LGBT Dream, and Park" in the same location three years later. This event catalyzed the tradition of holding large-scale LGBT activities in Taiwan during June, also known as Pride Month. This won one of its demands in 2019 when Taiwan became the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage, a landmark achievement celebrated worldwide.

These "Crystal Boys" in the New Park were understood as "deviants" by general public in 1970s Taiwan. In the United States, gays and lesbians, women, sex workers, and other people of marginalized statuses have often been marked as deviants (Adeyemi, "Deviance")[2]. In Taiwan, members of the gay community were constructed as "deviants." They were poor, and their practices of sexuality were not in line with the mainstream ideas of 70s Taiwanese society. Their parents saw them as freaks and kicked them out of the family. The New Park became a place for Taiwanese gay deviants to collectively struggle for their rights and freedoms, or to experience a personal sense of healing. As Adeyemi writes, deviance can be "a powerful position to be reclaimed and rallied around to specifically resist norms" (Adeyemi, 65). In Taiwan, this community of so-called "deviants" struggled collectively; moreover, their existence already resisted social norms and state prohibitions on sexual freedom. Every night in the 1970s, they gathered in New Park, told their stories, hid from the police, and made love. Their activity was a soundless shouting against society's stereotypes, calling for equity.

Long before its establishment as a queer space, the New Park was a historical figure in the 2.28 freedom incident. That was an event in 1947 where the public clashed with the government and demanded reforms. Although the 2.28 freedom incident was later suppressed by the Taiwanese government with force, its pursuit of peace was preserved. Therefore, the New Park is also called the Peace Memorial Park. Gradually, the dominant society—the so-called "normal" people—began to see the New Park as a characteristic of the gay community because of their gatherings. Gay men utilized the park's peaceful and anti-authoritarian characteristics to conduct parades and demonstrations, resisting the policies of then-Taipei mayor Chen Shui-bian, who had banned gatherings and banners in the park. The historical formation of the New Park might have given the gay community a sense of spiritual support. The community was also met with violent police suppression, but it sparked a more significant movement for LGBT rights in Taiwan. In the years following the incident, the Taiwanese LGBT community organized public events and demonstrations in New Park, and the park became an important symbol of LGBT visibility and activism in Taiwan.

Just when everyone thought that Taiwan's LGBT movement for freedom was making positive progress, the death of the Rose Boy, Ye Yongzhi, shook Taiwanese society.

It was hard for the general public to reckon with the fact that a junior high school student would face discrimination, school violence, sexual violence, and even murder, simply because of his "feminine" nature and discovering his true self. In the days leading up to his death, school administrators did not conduct any investigation, and the hospital provided an unlikely cause of death due to "heart disease." This appalling misinformation sparked anger among many Taiwanese people, as no one could trust a society where a child's life could not be guaranteed. Revolution begins with education. Two years after Yongzhi's death, the Taiwanese government transformed sex education into diversified education. In 2007, the Taiwanese Ministry of Education produced the documentary *Rose Boy*, and in 2018, the famous Taiwanese singer Jolin Tsai released a song called "Rose Boy" to support the queer community represented by Yongzhi. The song became immensely popular, and won the Golden Melody Awards in 2019. The lyrics declare, "You're born as a human, you're not guilty. Which roses don't have the thorns? The best revenge is to stay beautiful. The most beautiful bloom is when you start fighting back!" The concept of "Rose Boy" is that they are beautiful and strong, always fighting back and never give up. As Yongzhi's mom said in the LGBT Pride Parade in Kaohsiung in 2010, "My children, you have to be brave. God created people like you, there must be a light to fight for your human rights. Be yourself. Don't be afraid." These words encouraged the LGBT community and called for fighting back. No matter what era it is, resistance and struggle are what we, the LGBT community, must do in the face of homophobia. Only a thorny rose can protect us and change injustice. Society will not reform in a peaceful environment. In the late 20th century, there were gay and lesbian writers such as Pai Hsien-yung and Qiu Miaojin, who used words as weapons to resist; there were gay men's groups in the New Park who struggled and demonstrated continuously. And in the early 21st century, countless media outlets used documentaries, songs, paintings, and other forms of resistance to combat homophobia and transphobia. But through the recent years, we are always fighting. Just as Black transgender activist Miss Major said recently, referring to anti-transgender legislation in the US, young people should "get angry, get pissed off and dive into the fight" (Panel Discussion). We need to ignite the passion for resistance because those seemingly distant tragedies may land on us in the next second.

Chinese female writer Chai Jing wrote about queerness in Chinese society: "I asked Zhang Beichuan, 'Why doesn't our society accept homosexuals?' He said, 'Because in our sexual culture, reproduction is regarded as the purpose of sex, ignorance is regarded as purity, foolishness is regarded as a virtue, and prejudice is regarded as principle'" (Chaijing, Seeing, 238)[3]. Chai Jing and her friends pointed out the reason why Chinese and Taiwan society does not accept homosexuality. According to traditional views on marriage and reproduction as well as Confucianism, the most important thing is to form a family and have offspring. People need to maintain absolute trust in authority and do not need to think independently. After the founding of the modern state of China in 1949, the Chinese government was extremely repressive against the gay community because they break the Confucianism belief that the government has always adhered to, and do not follow the traditional family concept. In the eyes of the government, queer people disrupt the social order, and even threaten the government's rule. This ideology has also influenced the Taiwan government, which split from

China and was ruled by the Kuomintang. Though the governments are separate, Taiwanese society inherits Chinese traditional culture. It is particularly influenced by the Confucian and Mencian culture in southeastern China. A large number of people from the southeastern region migrated to Taiwan during the civil war between the two parties, which greatly influenced the formation of traditional social concepts in Taiwan. Under the double blow of traditional Confucianism and authoritarian rule, gay people in Taiwan in the 1970s had to survive both family pressure and social discrimination with no legal protections. The publication of *Crystal Boys* made their living conditions known to the public, awakened public awareness through the specific painful experience of the characters, and forced the Taiwan government to make changes.

To understand why a novel like *Crystal Boys* and the song "Rose Boy" could impact Taiwan's queer history, we can look to the political influence of China on Taiwan. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, all forms of parades, demonstrations, and large-scale gatherings were prohibited in Taiwan. This also affected the decision-making of the Taiwan government. Queer people could only meet in secret at night in the New Park, and it was difficult for them to promote LGBT ideas and fight for their rights through significant public performances. In the 1960s, Pai Hsien-yung, the author of *Crystal Boys*, and several other writers established a modern literary magazine and began publishing articles on homosexuality in the magazine. As the west, newspapers, and articles became the most popular way of spreading ideas about queer culture at the time. Therefore, although *Crystal Boys* is a novel, it contributes to popular knowledge of the story of the gay community that occurred in the New Park at that time, using Pai Hsien-yung's personal experience as a reference to avoid government restrictions

and cause a sensation in society. Now, decades later, the use of social media, especially TikTok has taken the place of novels as a space for queer and trans popular communications. Social media has become an effective way of spreading knowledge and has even fewer restrictions.

In the decades following the release of *Crystal Boys*, Taiwan's LGBT history was influenced powerfully by literary works. For example, Qiu Miaojin's *Notes of a Crocodile*[4] became a precedent for Taiwanese lesbian literature. More years have passed, and the art of "Rose Boy" continues to influence Taiwan and even Asia's queer history. Step by step, it has brought Taiwan's LGBT works to light and gradually raised public attention to queer issues. This demonstrates that in Taiwan, artistic expression and interpretation play an important role in queer history. Art has added a vivid color to Taiwan's queer history. With the continuous development of technology, the forms of expression in queer art will also change with the trends of the times, but the unchanging aspect is the spirit of fighting for freedom. The queer people of Taiwan are gradually achieving victories in their long-standing movement and struggle, and their spirit will also influence China and promote queer history in Asia and even the world.

References

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