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Imagining Female Tongzhi: The Social Significance of Female Same-sex Desire in Contemporary Chinese Literature

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Imagining Female *Tongzhi*: The Social Significance of Female Same-sex Desire in
Contemporary Chinese Literature

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May 6, 2014
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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Chapter One: A Historical Trajectory of Female Same Sex Desire	10
Republican China: Literature and China’s Entry Into Global Modernity	10
Post-Mao China: An Era of Subjectivity and Desire	14
Chapter Two: Local and Global Readings	21
Chapter Three: Envisioning Female Same-Sex Intimacy and Desire Through Literature	29
Wang Anyi’s “Brothers” and the Limited Resistance of Female Bonding	29
Chen Ran’s “Breaking Open”: Radical Potential Realized	37
Chen Ran’s <i>A Private Life</i> : Grappling with Public Influence on a Human Life.....	41
Lin Bai’s <i>The Seat on the Veranda</i> : Reading the Past to Illuminate the Present.....	46
Discussion	49
Chapter Four: Conclusion and Directions for Further Research	52
Bibliography	57

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Introduction

The last century in China has been a time of profound political, economic, social, and ideological change. These changes have greatly impacted many areas of life in China, including gender and sexuality, which in recent years have begun to draw more and more attention from anthropologists, sociologists, and scholars alike. In the wake of shifting cultural attitudes about gender and sexuality in Post-Mao China, new discourses have emerged about desires and subjectivities that had previously been denied visibility. This thesis discusses one such emerging discourse—the discourse on female homoeroticism in contemporary Chinese literature—and examines the ways in which this emerging discourse overlaps with and influences the social reality of female *tongzhi* (同志)—women that love and desire other women. Through a close examination of four contemporary Chinese¹ works featuring female same-sex intimacy and desire (“Brothers” by Wang Anyi, “Breaking Open” and *A Private Life* by Chen Ran, and “Seat on the Veranda” by Lin Bai), I aim to demonstrate the ways in which the literature within this discourse subverts and resists dominant norms and power structures while also illustrating how this mode of resistance was made possible in China’s specific historical, cultural, and societal context.

The importance of this project is manifold. For one, non-normative gender and sexuality is making itself known in an unprecedented way in contemporary Chinese society, as evidenced by the hundreds of Chinese gay and lesbian websites and growing number of gay and lesbian bars in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, as well as the founding of socially and politically-minded LGBT organizations, hotlines, and magazines. *Tongzhi*, a term originally used in Maoist days to mean “comrade,” was reclaimed in the 1980s in Hong Kong and Taiwan to refer to the

¹ For the scope of this project, I am limiting my focus to works from mainland China and not Taiwan or Hong Kong.

individuals and communities that acknowledged and even celebrated their difference from normative, heterosexual men and women. In the late 1990s, following the beginning of public access to Internet in China, the term and culture of *tongzhi* found its way to the mainland through online communication with Hong Kong and Taiwan, drawing also to some extent from Western gay and lesbian movements and culture. Today, the *tongzhi* community in China, despite its marginality, is developing rapidly. It has drawn more and more academic attention in recent years, although studies of this community have disproportionately focused on gay men,² demonstrating the necessity of providing further attention to female *tongzhi* reality and experience.

The formation and growth of novel public identities, such as *tongzhi*, has been facilitated largely by the Internet and the resulting possibilities for community and individual expression and exploration.³ However, the speed and intensity with which Chinese men and women entered and built upon *tongzhi* identity and culture hints at the fact that prior to the 1990s, questions of gender and sexuality were present in the minds of many. Indeed, for many years Chinese literature had served as a crucial means by which writers and readers explored and contested notions of gender and sexuality. In much the same way as the Internet facilitated widespread and rapid identity exploration and negotiation, so too have literary works prior to public access to Internet provided access to a variety of concerns, questions, and assertions about gender and

² Key studies that primarily concern male homosexuals include early works such as Zhou Jianren's *Tongxinglian wenti taolun ji* 同性恋问题讨论集, [*Discussion of the Issues of Homosexuality*] (1924), as well as more recent works including Li Yinhe and Wang Xiaobo's *Tamen de shijie: Zhongguo nan tongxinglian qunluo toushi* 他们的世界:中国男同性恋群落透视, [*Their World: Perspectives on the Chinese Gay Community*] (1992).

³ Kam, Lucetta Yip Lo. 2013. *Shanghai lalas: female Tongzhi communities and politics in urban China*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

sexuality within a changing China. This is especially true of women, who have historically (and presently) been underrepresented in medical, legal, and sociological works and studies with regard to sexuality. Therefore, this thesis will examine literature as a vehicle for serious discussion of gender and sexuality, as a place in which public spheres can exchange ideas critically. It will analyze the emergence of a discourse on female homoerotic desire as an influential agent that informs the social reality of those for whom female homoerotic desire is central, namely Chinese female *tongzhi*.

The questions guiding this project are: how does the emerging discourse on female homoeroticism in literature (the texts themselves, local and global criticism and analysis, and reactions of private readers) overlap with the lived realities of female *tongzhi*? What is the significance of the discourse for their everyday lives? My argument is that this emerging discourse influences the social reality of *tongzhi* communities by informing public imaginations and values, and by providing allegories through which individuals are able to reinterpret their lives. This argument builds off of previous work by scholars such as Tze-lan Deborah Sang, Patricia Sieber, Fran Martin, Lisa Rofel, Lydia Liu, and Li Xiaojiang, whose work touches upon the interconnectedness of history, discourse, social attitudes, and literary renderings of desire. It also draws heavily from activist and filmmaker Cui Zi'en and anthropologist Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, whose works have done much to document and explore *tongzhi* communities and subjectivities.

Literary works featuring female same-sex desire, their history, and their place within the larger context of changing cultural and social values about gender and sexuality speak to the power structures that influence female *tongzhi* existence and social reality. However, these works do not serve only as a mirror of this social reality; in fact, the two are mutually formed and

informed, as these works themselves, despite their marginality among oppressive and exploitative patriarchal and market forces, serve as a means of resistance and social critique by contesting society's imposed definitions of femininity and female sexuality while also articulating alternative possibilities for fulfillment.

Chapter One will address the historical and social forces that have accommodated the literary transition from an ideologically limited female same-sex friendship model of desire to the development of a discourse of homoerotic and romantic female same-sex desire in post-Mao China. This will include a summary of relevant cultural and literary trends, from Republican China (1912-1949) through the 1990s. Although Chinese literature featuring female homoeroticism can be found much earlier than Republican China,⁴ discussion of the topic of female same-sex desire entered the public sphere with unique force in the 1920s, accommodated in part by an influx of Western sexological work, popular fascination with concepts such as *lian'ai* (恋爱, love), and the changing status of women in Chinese society. This discussion faded from the public sphere in Maoist China (1949-1976) but resurfaced in the mid-1980s following relaxation of ideological control by the state after the Opening Up in 1979. A variety of cultural and ideological developments in the 1980s and 1990s then accommodated the emergence of literary renderings of female same-sex intimacy and desire that differed significantly from those produced in China's Republican period. Outlining this historical trajectory will contextually ground the following chapters' discussion and analysis.

Building off the previous chapter's explanation of the historical factors that have

⁴ See, for example, *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*. Translated by Lin Yutang. (Shanghai, 1936), in Lin Yutang. 1942. *The Wisdom of China and India*. New York: Random House. This autobiography of Shen Fu (沈復, 1763–1825) describes female same-sex infatuation between Shen Fu's wife Chen Yun and a courtesan named Hanyuan.

accommodated the emergence of texts featuring female homoerotic intimacy and desire in China, Chapter Two will focus on tensions between local and transnational analyses of these texts, as well as the new forms of reading that are being made possible in China's changing cultural setting. Given the transnational nature of literary analysis and the influence of globalization on sexual identity formation⁵, it is undeniable that both local and transnational analyses of Chinese texts participate in the formation of this discourse. Chinese and Western academics and critics have differed greatly in their analysis of texts containing elements of female homoeroticism. With this in mind, I will draw from both Chinese and transnational readings, and argue that the full significance of the emerging discourse on female homoeroticism is constituted by neither local nor transnational analysis but rather by the combination of and intersections between the two. In addition, I explore the significance of the interpretive agency of non-academic readership such as local *tongzhi* readers who identify with the content or non-*tongzhi* readers who may also enjoy or learn from such texts.

Chapter Three will provide an original analysis of four works by representative writers within this emerging discourse: "Brothers" by Wang Anyi, *A Private Life* and "Breaking Open" by Chen Ran, and "Seat on the Veranda" by Lin Bai. Drawing upon recent Western analytical work such as Patricia Sieber's *Red Is Not the Only Color* (2001), Tze-lan Deborah Sang's *The Emerging Lesbian* (2003) and Fran Martin's *Backward Glances* (2010), as well as analysis by Chinese literary critics and scholars such as Dai Jinhua and Li Xiaojiang, I will argue that through texts featuring female homoerotic intimacy and desire, contemporary Chinese writers critique many aspects of Chinese society and articulate possibilities for resistance and fulfillment

⁵ See Altman, Dennis. 2001. "The Globalization of Sexual Identities". *Global Sex*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. In this essay, Altman discusses the consequences of the diffusion of Western gay identity and activism on various cultures. This includes discussion of the ways that globalization can influence the formation of new forms of subjectivity and change the ways in which individuals imagine themselves.

that deviate from the social norm. This analysis will address the texts' treatment of femininity and female sexuality, the possibility or impossibility of female-female intimacy, and the symbolic significance of public and private space within the texts.

Chapter Four will return to my argument at large and reconnect and the significance of these works to the present reality of China's *tongzhi* community. Though much has changed in China since the publication of the literature featured in this thesis (Wang Anyi's "Brothers" was published in 1989, and Chen Ran's "Breaking Open," *A Private Life*, and Lin Bai's "Seat on the Veranda" were published in the 1990s), the underlying social criticisms voiced by these texts are still very relevant to female *tongzhi* individuals and communities. In an effort to connect the significance of these works to Chinese society in the 2000s, this final chapter will provide suggestions for further study and analysis for this emerging discourse.

Chapter One: A Historical Trajectory of Female Same-Sex Desire

Literary renderings of female same-sex intimacy and desire from the 1920s to the present are a rich site from which to observe and analyze some of the profound historical, cultural, and social changes that have occurred in China within the last century. Though representation of female homoeroticism can be found in literature of pre-modern China, the 1920s marks a profound shift in public thinking about gender and sexuality. At this time, female love received unprecedented attention and same-sex desire was beginning to be seen as something that could be “more than carnal or superficial” and that was “accorded depth, whether pathological or romantic” (Sang 2003, 122). This period is therefore a meaningful starting point for analyzing the historical trajectory of the discourse of female homoerotic desire. The emergence of this discourse was disrupted, however, by the elimination of public discourse about same-sex desire in the Mao era (1949-1976). Following the Opening Up and the many developments on the cultural scene in post-Mao China, a variety of factors facilitated the emergence of literary renderings of female same-sex intimacy, desire, love, and even sex, including: the emergence of women’s writing, the nation’s changing sexual morality, and relaxation of ideological control by the State beginning in the 1980s. This chapter will lay out a trajectory of the emerging discourse on female homoeroticism by discussing relevant historical background from Republican China to the 1990s. It will focus on the place of women, femininity, and female sexuality in literature, as well as the dominant attitudes toward same-sex intimacy and eroticism for both pre- and post-Mao periods.

Republican China: Literature and China’s Entry Into Global Modernity

China’s Republican era (1912-1949) was a time of fervent discussion and exploration of new theories and values. During this period, women began to gain genuine social power for the

first time. Many institutional changes emerged, including a new-style single-sex education made available to women, offering new opportunities for women to form same-sex allegiances and to achieve distance from immediate family surveillance. The commercialization of writing that took place in the early Republican era also afforded women new possibilities for expression and income, facilitating the emergence of the first generation of professional female writers such as Ding Ling and Lu Yin.

Another factor that greatly influenced the emerging possibilities available to women at this time is the symbolic importance of women to China's efforts to enter into global modernity. The status of women in Chinese society represented a larger project of national salvation and modernity. The "new woman" of Republican China was one that cast off the feudal family and its imposed morality and instead pursued freedom and individuality. At this time, the discourse surrounding women was used as a tool to criticize and reject traditional morality and practice; the woman, representative of China itself, was in crisis and required reinvention. This project was undertaken largely by male intellectuals.⁶ The symbolic importance of women had implications for the significance of women's literary contributions at the time. In discussions on women's relationship with literature, both male and female intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s "[positioned] women writers as pedagogical subjects of China's burgeoning modernity, not its leading proponents. This sentiment precluded contemporary women writers from being recognized as positive agents of social change, and circumscribed their contributions to realizing a modern China" (Ferry 2005, 47). This demonstrates the complexity of women's improving social status at this time; paradoxically, women's centrality as a symbol within dominant

⁶ For example, the status of women is addressed in literature by male author Lu Xun in "New Year's Sacrifice." Other male scholars leading the discussion of women and modernity included Liang Qichao, Zhou Zuoren, and Mao Dun. For further discussion see Ferry, Megan M. 2005. "Woman and Her Affinity to Literature: Defining Women Writers' Roles in China's Cultural Modernity" in *Contested Modernities in Chinese Literature*, edited by Charles A. Laughlin. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

discourse coexisted with their continued marginality in social practice.

Despite this paradox, the literary climate of Republican China made possible new avenues of female expression, a development that is unquestionably relevant to the burgeoning literary discourse around female bonding. Fictions produced by female writers in Republican China, such as Ding Ling's "Miss Sophia's Diary" (1927), depicted intimate female friendships, some of which included homoerotic undertones. These romantic friendships served as a way for women to distance themselves from conventional roles (for example, of daughter, wife, and mother) and to achieve some level of autonomy. In practice, these friendships were culturally viable, seen as manifestations of a romantic idealization of *tongxing ai* (同性爱), and were considered "sweet and ennobling experiences for young women" (Martin 2010, 13). However, their viability was largely due to the fact that such displays of intimacy were not considered a true threat to the heterosexual norm, given that society did not look upon female-female intimacy as love of the same significance or magnitude as between a man and a woman. Tze-lan Sang describes these depictions of female same-sex desire as "inherently ideologically limited in that they do not explicitly affirm long-term female-female partnerships and female-female lust" (Sang 2003, 158).

The introduction of Western sexology greatly influenced public discourse on sex and sexuality in the 1920s and 1930s. Sang's (2003) historical analysis has demonstrated that the consequences of the transculturation of sexology are more complex than past views supposed. For example, Chou Wah-shan claims that pre-modern Chinese society was tolerant of same-sex behavior and that it was the arrival of European sexology that spurred the adoption of

homophobic and pathological views toward homosexual behaviors.⁷ Sang cautioned against the simplicity of such a view and argued instead that while Western sexology did serve as a tool to pathologize romantic or sexual love between women, China's encounter with Western ideologies also facilitated some homophilic alignments by Chinese intellectuals.

On one hand, whereas in late-imperial China same-sex intimacy (especially between females) was treated with little concern, the influx of Western scientific and medical publications featuring descriptions of emotional and physical same-sex intimacy between men and women facilitated new medicalized discourse on homoeroticism in China. Western "sexual science" such as sexological work by Havelock Ellis portrayed such intimacy, which it conflated with unconventional gender behavior, as abnormal and pathological.⁸ However, while these views did influence Chinese conceptions of deviant or pathological sexual behavior and emotional inclination, medical manuals or scholarship was not the only context in which the public engaged with the subject of homosexuality. Discussion of same-sex love or *tongxing lian'ai* (同性恋爱) was also prevalent during this time in the form of translated articles, as well as major urban journals on women, gender, education, love, relationships, and sex.⁹ That translators chose the construct of *lian'ai* (恋爱), or romantic love, as part of the translation of homosexuality rather than *tongxing xingyu* (同性性欲) or same-sex sexual desire, indicates that emotional intensity and sympathy were highlighted in this discourse rather than simply carnal desire. Therefore, it is

⁷ Chou Wah-Shan (Zhou Huashan). 2000. *Hou zhimin tongzhi* 后殖民同志 [*Postcolonial tongzhi*]. Hong Kong: Xianggang Haworth. See Sang 2003, 37-65 for further analysis of pre-modern Chinese attitudes toward female-female relations, including views held and explanations given by twentieth-century commentators.

⁸ See Ellis, Havelock. 1900. *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*. Philadelphia: F. A. Davis.

⁹ Sang 2003, 106

inadequate to see this time period as generating only negative views of same-sex intimacy and desire; rather, at this time Chinese public opinion of same-sex love was ambiguous and complex.

By the 1940s, the discourse on female bonding was overshadowed and disrupted by intellectual debates that were fully occupied by questions of national defense and political revolution in the face of political turmoil, including the war of resistance against Japan and the Chinese civil war. Consequently, questions of gender and sexuality faded from public discourse. Under the socialist discourse that focused on the mass-driven revolution, individuality was obliterated and gender attributes were weakened dramatically. Gender difference became invisible, with its most extreme manifestation found in the Maoist program of gender similarity that, under the guise of pursuing equality, erased femininity and held women to male standards.¹⁰ During this time, “gender became an unmarked and neutralized category, its role as a vessel of self-identity was greatly diminished, and it lost its significance for gender politics, which was replaced by class politics” (Yang 1999, 41). The resulting silence about these topics continued until the 1980s, when ideological control by the State relaxed.

Post-Mao China: An Era of Subjectivity and Desire

The Post-Mao period brought about rapid change in China’s culture, politics, and economic structure. The emergence of a discourse on female same-sex intimacy and desire is related to a number of factors facilitated by these changes. For one, the emergence of women’s writing, described as one of the most important new developments on the cultural scene in post-1979 China,¹¹ was linked to the opening up of social spaces for exploration of identities other

¹⁰ For details on gender erasure, see Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui. “From Gender Erasure to Gender Difference: State Feminism, Consumer Sexuality, and Women’s Public Sphere in China” in Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui. 1999. *Spaces of their own: women’s public sphere in transnational China*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

¹¹ Dai Jinhua, 1999. “Rewriting Chinese Women: Gender Production and Cultural Space in the Eighties and Nineties”. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.

than class—including gender and sexual identities—following reforms that declared class struggle officially over. It was during this time that women reemerged onto China’s literary stage. This reemergence took place against the backdrop of literary movements primarily concerned with explaining, rejecting, or reacting to the past and its literary traditions. These movements took men as the primary literary subjects and symbols. Avant-garde fiction, the main wave of literature in the 1980s, was in fact intensely misogynistic.¹² Other literary waves, such as the root-searching novels of the mid-eighties, ignored female subjectivity and included women only as objects of male desire. Dai Jinhua has argued that male cultural productions can be seen as “patriarchal culture’s counterattack against the gender equality of the previous era.”¹³ These literary trends contributed to a major project of women’s writing: exploration of how female self-identity is produced in a patriarchal society.

While resisting the misogynistic and objectifying aspects of male writing, women’s writing in the 1980s also reacted against the gender erasure that took place under Mao by focusing on female subjectivity.¹⁴ Dissatisfied with the elimination of feminine discourse in Maoist China, female writers in the early 1980s such as Wang Anyi began to produce literature that expressed their anxiety that women no longer knew how to be women. This literature featured heightened attention to gender difference and was intended to facilitate examination and rediscovery of a specifically female consciousness. This concept of consciousness, or *yishi* (意识)

¹² Lu, Tonglin. 1995. *Misogyny, Cultural Nihilism & Oppositional Politics: Contemporary Chinese Experimental Fiction*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

¹³ See Dai (1999) for a thorough discussion of how women are depicted both by male and female writers in the 1980s and 1990s.

¹⁴ Other examples include writings such as Zhang Xinxin’s “How Did I Miss You” and films such as Huang Shuqin’s “Human Woman Demon,” which also addressed the psychological and social consequences of the masculinization of women.

contrasts with the political consciousness, or *juewu* (觉悟) so central to revolutionary and class-based discourse. According to Li Xiaojiang, the centrality of individuality, gender, and the agency of the individual to consciousness (*yishi*) allow female consciousness to stand in rebellion against the political consciousness (*jiewu*) of the previous era.¹⁵

An essentialist approach to gender exists within these writings alongside a critique of the systems within which women are oppressed. Both the new wave of liberal feminism and the developing consumer culture took this essentialist approach as a rediscovered truth following Maoist gender erasure. Indeed, China's new consumer culture is "based on a fundamental gender bifurcation, and the exaggeration and celebration of gender difference and sexuality" that is also "an asymmetrical construction" in which "there is the knowing and controlling male gaze and the female object of contemplation and desire" (Yang 1999, 50). In the 1990s, female writers such as Chen Ran reacted strongly against the trend of gender essentialism and advocated instead for the need to focus on issues of humanity rather than on gender and sexual difference. I will address this ideological shift, its rationale, and its significance in Chapter Three.

This exploration of female identity is one component of the broader discussion of human nature that exploded into the public realm in the 1980s. In addition, the development of the market economy, the reintroduction of Western culture, and the emergence of new popular and academic studies of sex and sexuality in the PRC also spurred a large number of publications about sex, reintroducing the topic to the public sphere. Since the 1980s, sex has become "one of the most prominent discursive formations and commercial enterprises in the PRC" (Evans 1997,

¹⁵ Li, Xiaojiang. 1999. "With What Discourse Do We Reflect on Chinese Women? Thoughts on Transnational Feminism in China" in *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*, ed. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

167-68). Discourse around sex and sexuality gained new momentum and significance in the 1990s, facilitated by the emerging discourse on desire that was legitimized by China's efforts to reconfigure its relationship to the postsocialist world.

Arguing that socialism restricted natural human desires, official, intellectual, and popular discourses portrayed the ability to articulate desire as a key component to achieving a new era in China—an era of cosmopolitan worldliness, in which China's "desiring subjects" are able to overcome their socialist past and achieve modernity through expression of their gendered and human natures.¹⁶ The legitimacy of this discourse of desire was strengthened after the 1989 Tiananmen incident, in response to which the Chinese state encouraged Chinese citizens' sexual, material, and affective self-interest in an effort to create a novel, cosmopolitan China. Manifestations of this discourse of desire, characterized by the glorification of subjectivity and pleasure, can be found in pop culture, film, and fiction.

Lisa Rofel's work on desire in China emphasizes that China's "desiring subjects" are drawn toward the project of embracing human nature and desires, which "takes place in the remaking of the public spaces and stories through which human nature discovers itself" (Rofel 2007, 6). In other words, the creation of a global, modern "desiring China" takes place in the realm of public culture. Literary narratives are therefore full of potential to influence the normative ideals of those involved in the project of embracing desire, and to "create imaginations," or influence public imaginability of certain desires, identities, and practices for actual social subjects. To the extent that sentiment and desire incite social action, literature such as that discussed in this thesis can therefore be seen not only as a form of social critique, but also

¹⁶ Rofel, Lisa. 1999. *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism*. Berkley: University of California Press.

as an active means by which women can actively subvert oppressive normative structures. This is because “[p]ublic narrations of desire are... suffused with power. The power to create imaginations and make them stick. The power to produce selves who take it upon themselves to embody [certain] knowledges, visions, and sensibilities. And the power to differentiate among those deemed appropriate subjects of these imaginations and those cast as inappropriate” (Rofel 2007, 24).

Whereas in the 1980s, homosexuality was still seen as an ambiguous medical and legal issue following the absolute silence about the topic since the 1940s, the increasing significance of desire in the public imagination of the 1990s spurred many to believe that homosexuals should be able to and free to articulate their desires. By 1994, the disease model of homosexuality was debunked by a large number of scientific and health professionals.¹⁷ It is alongside these significant shifts in popular and medical attitudes toward homosexuality that a specifically homoerotic discourse of female same-sex love emerged and manifested in literature. For the first time, authors such as Chen Ran and Lin Bai addressed same-sex intimacy and desire alongside issues of sexuality and personal identity. Their writings dealt explicitly with female sexuality and the possibility of female-female sex and female-female long-term partnerships.

Compared to earlier narratives of fleeting adolescent attachment or purely emotional female-female intimacy and friendship, this emerging discourse is ideologically rich and complex. Earlier discourses of female-female intimacy allowed female same-sex desire to be formulated and embodied only as inferior or temporary relative to a hegemonic discourse of the necessity of ultimate heterosexuality and marriage. In the early stages of this emerging discourse of female homoeroticism, represented in this thesis by Wang Anyi’s “Brothers,” this ideological

¹⁷ Sang 2003

limitation comes to light through the struggles of female characters seeking to articulate their desire and emotion without preexisting frameworks that apply to their experiences. A few years later, authors Chen Ran and Lin Bai continued to address this ideological limitation in works such as “Breaking Open,” *A Private Life*, and “Seat on the Veranda,” which offer alternative visions of femininity, the female role, and female sexuality, and argue for the legitimacy of desires for emotional and physical relationships outside of the traditional heterosexual marriage or family unit.

While the emerging discourse of desire in the 1990s facilitated the emergence of literature that featured female same-sex desire in unprecedented ways, it would be misleading to suggest that homosexuality in China was instantly accepted by all of society at this time. The true social reality for China’s *tongzhi* population, especially female *tongzhi*, is incredibly complex. For example, there are voices in China that speak out against homosexuality as being unhealthy and counter to human nature: the stigma of deviant sexuality has been used as an excuse for police violence, and a number of *tongzhi* individuals have attempted suicide due to feelings of shame.¹⁸ Li Yinhe claims that female *tongzhi* are perhaps more tolerated than their male counterparts,¹⁹ but even still, normative gender expectations and social forces influence and limit their behaviors and relationships. These include but are not limited to: heteronormativity, extreme pressure to marry and reproduce,²⁰ and a lack of recognition of the possibility of an active female sexuality (especially independent of a man).²¹ These factors can result in difficulty

¹⁸ Cui, Zien. 2009. *Queer China, Comrade China*. New York: DGenerate Films.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Li, Yinhe. 2002. *Zhongguo nüxing de ganqing yu xing* 中国女性的感情与性 [*Love and Sexuality of Chinese Women*]. Beijing: Zhongguo youyi.

²¹ Kam 2013

forming or finding *tongzhi* communities, feelings of guilt and shame, and feelings of illegitimacy. However, within the broadening social space in China from the 1990s and beyond, new means of contesting and subverting these expectations and resisting these pressures are becoming possible.

As this chapter has demonstrated, the historical trajectory of discourses surrounding female same-sex love, intimacy, and desire owes much to the longstanding efforts of China's political establishment and academic community to achieve international recognition and to negotiate China's position in relation to the rest of the world. The efforts in Republican China to liberate women—a project intricately linked to China's desire to be seen by the world as properly modern—as well as the discourse of desire in the 1990s that reflects China's efforts to situate itself in the postsocialist world, demonstrate the importance of considering the transnational nature of the emerging discourse of female homoeroticism. The historical and social conditions that facilitated the emergence of texts featuring female same-sex desire are unquestionably influenced by transnational processes, but even beyond this, the transnational distribution, translation, and scholarship on these texts highlights the fact that this emerging discourse has transcended exclusively Chinese domains. The following chapter will discuss local (Chinese) as well as global readings of these texts in an effort to demonstrate that the tensions and negotiations between the two that constitute a critical component of this discourse.

Chapter Two: Local and Global Readings

The texts and analyses that constitute this emerging discourse are unarguably transnational in nature, given that works by authors such as those featured in this thesis are translated and circulated transnationally, inviting analysis by non-Chinese critics and scholars. As China's broadening social realm is increasingly open to new forms of analysis entering elite and academic literary discourse, it is not surprising that transnational readings and frameworks are to be included as critical components of this emerging discourse. However, appealing to the transnational nature of the discourse should not overshadow the significance of local (Chinese) readings. This chapter aims to illustrate that the full significance of this emerging discourse is composed of the tensions and negotiations between both local Chinese and Western readings, along with the interpretive agency of private, nonprofessional readers.

Works featuring female same-sex intimacy and desire have been met with many competing interpretations. For example, feminist critics have praised the works' portrayal of female consciousness, while conservative readers have accused the works of being self-indulgent or intellectually petty. Given that the production of these texts is intimately linked to commercial culture, profit-oriented publishers further complicate the process of interpretation by packaging the works as objects for mass voyeuristic consumption.²² However, Sang (2003) has argued that fictionalized voices of female homoerotic desire are "opening more lines of communication than their critics can shut down" (Sang 2003, 173). She argues that multiple reading practices are possible, and that texts' reception is not confined by a dichotomous relationship between censure and voyeurism—two complicit reactions to depictions of subversive female sexuality and

²² Sang 2003, 27

subjectivity.²³ Sang has termed the broadening social realm in China *the third space*, which resonates with formulations of the third term in contemporary theory that emphasizes a capacity to unsettle or move beyond a dualistic bind.²⁴ Within this space, the possibility of multiple reading practices surfaces. In this broadening social realm, diverse analytical frameworks and interpretive strategies used by Chinese and Western critics, scholars, and nonprofessional readers contribute to the vitality and complexity of the emerging discourse of female homoeroticism in contemporary Chinese literature.

Arguing for the validity and importance of multiple meanings of a text involves resisting the domination of one kind of analysis and tapping into and negotiating others. Such a project inevitably brings with it the challenge of evoking unequal positions of power or authority held by those using certain terms or analytical frameworks, especially in a transnational literary scene.²⁵ Therefore, as new interpretive strategies are made possible in China's broadening cultural space, and as Western analysis accompanies Chinese analysis, it is necessary to acknowledge the ways in which certain reading strategies do not or cannot happen at the level of public discourse in China. In drawing attention to this point, I do not aim to suggest that Chinese discourse is lacking and must be supplemented by Western discourse. Rather, I want to emphasize that the different interpretations provided by local and global readers allow this discourse to surpass the limits of any single trend of dominant readings, multiplying the texts' potential as a site of social

²³ Ibid., 182

²⁴ Other contemporary theorists that address the importance of transcending dualistic or dichotomous thinking include, for example, Donna Haraway and Gloria Anzaldúa. Sang's sense of the third term resonates with these formulations, but is intended specifically to address a social space in which the reception of literary works is not bound by the dichotomous relation between censorship and voyeuristic economy.

²⁵ See Liu, Lydia. 1995. *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity--China, 1900-1937*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

critique.

The different contexts and connotations of concepts that on the surface appear to be easily translatable can complicate or prevent constructive exchange between Western and Chinese scholarship on women. A particularly clear example of this can be seen in the fact that contemporary female writers in China often actively reject the label “feminist,” although their works touch upon issues and share views that are regarded as feminist by many Western scholars. As works by these authors circulate transnationally and receive attention and analysis by non-Chinese scholars and critics eager to read these works as feminist, it is important that the Chinese connotations of the word are also taken into consideration.

Chinese authors’ refusal of the label “feminist” stems in part from writers’ relationship to the State and official feminism, which claims to represent and protect the rights of women while in actuality promoting a totalizing discourse that suppresses female difference.²⁶ The political identity of women in China is thoroughly inscribed within official State discourse on gender, which declared men and women equal in the 1940s and now holds that women have *already* been liberated, thereby reducing discursive space for discussion about ways in which women are still disadvantaged in Chinese society. The official representative of women and official feminism in China, the state apparatus Fulian or the All-China Women’s Federation, is unpopular among Chinese women, who claim that it does not truly represent them.²⁷ Contemporary female critics who insist on the creation of new conceptual approaches to the study of women’s works (such as “female consciousness” rather than “feminism,” and “female

²⁶ For an in-depth discussion of the relationship between Chinese women and China’s official feminism, see Liu, Lydia. 1993, “Invention and Intervention: The Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature” in *Gender Politics in Modern china: Writing in Feminism* ed. Tani E. Barlow. Durham: Duke University Press.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 38

literature” rather than “woman writer” as a subcategory in mainstream criticism) participate in what Lydia Liu refers to as both invention and intervention; that is, they invent new terms of debate that break away from the totalizing discourse of official feminism, thereby initiating a historical intervention that “[contests] the claims of the state, Fulian, and official feminism as the role representatives of Chinese women” (Liu 1993, 56). According to Liu, by doing this, writers, critics, and the literary tradition as a whole strive to “[reappropriate] the historical category of women from state discourse for the purpose of empowering the female gender.”²⁸

State discourse, however, is not the only element that shapes writers’ attitudes toward the term feminism. For example, Wang Anyi has expressed dissatisfaction with the intentions of Western women who take interest in Chinese female writers “from a feminist perspective,” when such interest may actually reflect a desire to prove the universality of Western feminism rather than to take the literature seriously and consider the historical differences between China and the West.²⁹ Chen Ran also distances herself from the term feminist, saying that feminism “should be left to critics,” who “are there to generate new terminology for us to admire.”³⁰

As critics and scholars engage with texts, it is important to recognize the problems encountered in the process of applying Western discourse and terminology to Chinese situations, texts, etc. According to Li Xiaojiang, a prominent critic and self-described mainland Chinese feminist, the problem with “feminism” is not that contemporary Chinese women refuse Western feminist ideologies, but rather that the different connotations and contexts behind words central to the discourse of feminism—such as “equality,” which in the Chinese context has been used by

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 39

²⁹ Zheng, Wang. 1993. “Three Interviews: Wang Anyi, Zhu Lin, Dai Qing”, in *Gender Politics in Modern China*, ed Tani E. Barlow. Durham: Duke University Press.

³⁰ “Interview with Chen Ran by Lin Songyu”. 2006

dominant discourse to deny women difference—renders Western feminist discourse inaccessible to many women in China.³¹ Li describes the necessity of *constructing* discourse rather than passively accepting one ready-made, claiming that if one succumbs to the latter, one can allow oneself to be controlled. Li sees the project of constructing a discourse for oneself as a means to overturn power structures.³² This is precisely what Chinese writers and critics do by rejecting the term “feminist.” In doing this, they assert the significance of their Chinese context, making clear the unique social circumstances at which their commentary is aimed. They also participate in historical intervention, creating new terms and bringing new conceptual approaches to the study of women’s work. In other words, by rejecting the label “feminist,” writers and critics in turn resist the hegemony of both Western discourses and totalizing state discourse.

The purpose of this distinction is not to claim the irrelevance or inapplicability of Western feminist ideology in China, but rather to illustrate the counterproductivity of applying Western feminism as a universal truth to China’s particular circumstances. Chinese writers have still at times drawn from ideas and concepts central to Western feminism, and feminist readings of texts have also contributed in meaningful ways to the discourse of female homoerotic desire. Indeed, Chinese literary critic Wang Ning argues that literature by Chinese women is a product of both China’s struggle for domestic national liberation as well as Western influence, including Western feminism. This has resulted in a literary phenomenon that is simultaneously “feminine, feminist and female, and even somewhat anti-feminist or ‘female-centric’, which... has much to do with the unique Chinese conditions in a cultural transnational period.”³³

³¹ Li 1999

³² *Ibid.*, 262

³³ Wang Ning 2002, 209

There are two words for feminism in China, *nü quan zhuyi* (woman's rights-ism/power-ism) and *nü xing zhuyi* (woman's gender-ism), with the former relating to what is perceived as a more Western, oppositional feminism and the latter referring to a "specifically 'indigenous' Chinese feminism," which involves "new cultural strategies and attitudes towards women in the twenty-first century."³⁴ Schaffer and Song (2007) argue that literary works such as those featured in this thesis, along with several other branches of contemporary women's writing, serve as a critical platform for indigenous Chinese feminism.³⁵ This indigenous feminism, or "alternative feminism," seeks "to disengage... from the restrictions and orthodoxies of state feminism" and explore the physiological and psychological experiences particular to women, though in ways that are not too quick to adopt the concepts and priorities of Western feminisms, which are not always relevant to Chinese women (Yang 1999, 57-59). In the following chapter, I will illustrate ways in which the works of Wang Anyi, Chen Ran, and Lin Bai might be read as manifestations of this indigenous Chinese feminism.

Like "feminism," "lesbian" is a term that scholars and critics have used to analyze works featuring female homoerotic intimacy and desire. "Lesbian" can be a politically charged term that carries connotations of Western identity politics that do not necessarily apply to the female homoerotic intimacy and desire featured in these Chinese texts. Some scholars and critics have avoided the term for this very reason.³⁶ Others, such as Sang (2003), acknowledge that even as the word is heavy with culturally-specific meanings, it is necessary for the project at hand to

³⁴ Schaffer and Song 2007, 20-21

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ For example, Fran Martin opts for a nonidentitarian approach, using the descriptor "female homoerotic" rather than "lesbian" in order to achieve distance from the self-conscious and minoritarian Western-style lesbian identity. Lydia Liu takes a similar stance in "Invention and Intervention," using the terminology "female bonding" rather than "homosexuality."

redefine the word, complicating its meaning in the Western context and serving as an example of ways in which, in globalization, peripheral models can contest and hybridize forms of hegemonic culture.

In China, critics have been hesitant or unwilling to address what might be interpreted as “lesbian content,” or female homoerotic intimacy and desire, in these texts for a variety of reasons, including not wanting to soil their reputations by addressing a socially marginalized topic, or because homosexuality has been considered trivial.³⁷ Sang (2003) argues that in China’s broadening social realm, lesbian readings are certainly possible, and that given the dismissal or “glossing over” of lesbian content by Chinese professional scholars and critics, to read lesbian desire in these texts is “to read against local hegemony” and that “analysis that seeks to show the nontriviality of lesbian matters automatically declares itself to be a translocal and transnational practice.”³⁸

One group that has read lesbian desire in these texts is nonprofessional readers, who according to Sang (2003) “contest mainstream interpretations from the margins” by reading lesbian or queer content into novels.³⁹ This demonstrates that the interpretive agency of nonprofessional readers is another component of this emerging discourse that should not be neglected. Chinese readers do not simply passively accept and adopt the terms of dominant discourse—for example, *nü tongxing lian* 女同性恋 and “lesbian”—but rather draw from and supplement this discourse with their own terms, including *lala* 拉拉, *tongzhi* 同志, and *nütong* 女同. Self-identified gay and lesbian readers have expressed that these texts articulate their

³⁷ Sang 2003

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 186

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 200

experiences vividly, demonstrating that even when “lesbian” content is glossed over by professional critics, it is still a critical element of the texts. For example, Lin Bai has noted that many female homosexual readers have written her admiring letters, claiming to “see their own reflections in the psychological experience she fictionalizes” (Sang 2003, 183).

Though the tensions and negotiations between local and global readings of these texts are fraught with uneven power and authority, what this chapter has aimed to illustrate is that the discourse is constituted by a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations, provided by professional and unprofessional readers alike. The key significance of this plurality is that it opens up—at least in the domain of literature—alternatives for female sexuality and life choices. The process of negotiating these many different reading practices takes place in academia but also in public discourse, resulting in a complex and vital flow—at times turbulent or fraught with contention, but nonetheless productive—of ideas and concepts that inform public imagination and resonate with readers in an empowering way.

Reading these texts as local engagements with global discourses of gender and sexuality, my goal is to explore the ways in which these literary works offer social critique and resist hegemonic analytical frameworks that fail to recognize or respect the historical and cultural context of the works. In the chapter to follow, I will draw upon both Chinese and Western literary scholarship to analyze four works by representative writers, paying particular attention to ways in which these works can be seen as both evidence of transnational influence but also as informed by their own uniquely Chinese specificity.

Chapter Three: Envisioning Female Same-Sex Intimacy and Desire Through Literature

If one imagines literature as a platform for global discussion of gender and sexuality, the works of Wang Anyi, Chen Ran, and Lin Bai would certainly be key channels by which China's voice joins the dialogue. These women are each well-known and respected writers in the Chinese literary scene, and their works have received significant attention both locally and globally over their treatment of women, gender, and sexuality by scholars and critics in China and beyond. The four works selected for this project, Wang Anyi's "Brothers" (1989), Chen Ran's "Breaking Open" (1995) and *A Private Life* (1996), and Lin Bai's "Seat on the Veranda" (1997) are all well-known and widely-read works in China that have in recent years been translated into English and circulated transnationally for the first time. All of these works touch upon the theme of female same-sex intimacy and desire, though their emphases and approaches to the theme differ. Reading these differences as a consequence of the time of their production is one way to look into the trajectory of the emerging discourse of female homoeroticism, and as such a chronological reading strategy will prove useful. That being said, the societal forces reflected and contested by these texts do overlap in many ways, and for that reason this analysis will focus on the central topics of femininity and female sexuality, the possibility or impossibility of female-female intimacy, and the symbolic function of space within each text.

Wang Anyi's "Brothers" and the Limited Resistance of Female Bonding

"Brothers", published in 1989, tells the story of three female students whose intimate friendship in college allowed each to achieve a sense of authentic selfhood. The women refer to one another as Old One, Old Two, and Old Three, a form of address most often used when referring to an older male in order to evoke a sense of familiarity and intimacy. In addition to these names, the women call themselves "brothers" and refer to their husbands as their "wives."

These linguistic maneuvers distance the women from their female identity and reinforce the women's solidarity and closeness. The women sustain the friendship throughout their time in university, but upon leaving school the women go their separate ways and pursue their own life paths without further contact. After years, two of the women, Old Li and Old Wang (Old One and Old Two, respectively) resume contact through letters and visits, and they experience the same intense spiritual and emotional closeness that they did in their school days. This rekindled relationship allows the women to feel more connected to their authentic selfhood and to find some sense of relief from domestic life. However, ultimately Old Li's role as a mother prevents the two women from maintaining their friendship, as Old Li blames Old Wang for accidentally injuring her young son, and the friendship ends abruptly.

Essentialized feminine consciousness and the quest for "woman" and "self" is the focus of this story. Following the Maoist project that subordinated the individual to the masses and claimed "men and women are the same," to undertake a literary exploration of a female "self" is to "retrieve women's experiences from the world of discourse constructed by men—[a step] unprecedented in the history of China" (Li 1999, 272). In "Brothers," Wang Anyi illustrates the ways in which this search is complicated by social norms and the feminine roles of "wife" and "mother." Reacting against the gender erasure under Mao, the story takes an essentialist stance on gender while also exploring the challenges and difficulties women face when they confront social roles they are expected to enact.

At the beginning of the story, the women are in university and are relatively free of these social roles due to their physical distance from their husbands. Because of this, their school years together are a time of profound personal exploration and self-expression, allowing each "brother" to achieve a sense of authentic selfhood. This is possible for the "brothers" because of

their willingness to deviate from the expected path, as symbolized by their frequent predawn hikes:

They put on their walking shoes and quietly walked through the darkest part of the campus before dawn to climb Phoenix Hill. They did not take the paths well worn by the feet of generations, but chose to walk in pathless places full of thorny brambles and sharp stones. By the time they reached the top of the hill, the sun was just emerging from the river and a fierce wind let their hair flutter behind them. Speechless at the beauty of the sight, each stood alone, forgetting time and space. (“Brothers”, 93)

During these hikes, the women find great relief and freedom away from the institutional setting, and they demonstrate their readiness to deviate from tradition or convention in their journey.

This passage demonstrates the potential of the “brothers” exploration; together they defy custom and arrive at a place of profound beauty and meaning that enriches each of them individually.

The women in the story are not conventionally feminine in many regards, especially when they are together. In school the three “brothers” were messier and lazier than the worst of their male classmates, and later in life Old Li and Old Wang’s (Old One and Old Two, respectively) attentiveness to and tolerance toward domestic duties is continually disrupted by the passion that surfaces when the two are together. Throughout the story, clinging to feminine roles and temperament is treated as an act of surrender and abandonment of selfhood. For example, as the women’s time at university draws to a close, Old Three signals her final ideological departure from her “brothers,” by choosing to sacrifice her own happiness in order to become a proper wife and make her own needs secondary to her husband’s. As Old Three expresses her newfound goal in life and her conscious choice to give up her pursuit of selfhood independent from men, she gathers the dirty dishes that had previously always been left unwashed. Picking up and washing the dishes symbolizes her adoption of feminine duty and her final departure from her earlier ways of life. This sentiment reemerges later in the story as Old Wang turns to the idea of motherhood as a way to fill the emptiness in her life, despite her belief

that having a child would be the ultimate sacrifice of her selfhood and freedom. In both instances, the story equates femininity with servitude and sacrifice. However, the only means of escape once afforded to the “brothers,” the distance from female identity afforded by non-feminine address and role reversal with their “wives,” cannot be maintained within the context of marriage.

An essentializing approach to gender also complicates the “brothers’” pursuit of freedom. For example, as Old Three rationalizes abandoning her non-femininity at the end of her school years, she realizes, “No matter how often she might call herself a ‘brother,’ and call her man ‘Mrs.,’ male was still male and female female, and no one could change that” (“Brothers”, 96). Furthermore, the women often talk about the inevitability of male and female codependence, in conjunction with commentary about the “withering of masculinity” in contemporary China and the women’s disillusionment with men. However, when the women try to envision a world of only women, they are always confronted with a feeling of having gone too far, or a sense of absolute impossibility, and they find themselves “face to face with the black hole at the center of the universe” (“Brothers”, 99). The women see man as “the natural companion of a woman,” because between women the issues of sex and procreation cannot be solved. The union of man and woman is therefore seen as necessary, despite the fact that in such an arrangement, each person becomes “a prison to the other” (“Brothers”, 114). This sense of inevitability highlights the difficult position of women; any radical subversive potential that lies in community between women is limited not only linguistically (as evidenced by the lack of female equivalent that captured the intimacy of friendship as done with “brotherhood”), biologically, and socially, given that society’s imposed female roles of wife and mother inevitably place women in relation to men. Subverting the masculine system requires taking on the language of the system, and

removing the masculine brings the women to an impasse.

The liberating and empowering potential of female-female intimacy is confined in this story to an incredibly personal space, such as that afforded by private correspondence (through letters) or one-on-one conversation between the two women, which often took place in the home when husbands were absent, and often replaced engagement with the public or emergence into the outside community. In university, before the women fully adopted their domestic duties, the possibility of self-exploration and relief was founded on the distance the school afforded the women from their roles as wives, thereby affording the women freedom to engage in private and personal same-sex friendship. This sense of freedom and relief was easily disrupted, however, by visits from husbands, and it was brought to a swift end following the women's graduation. After the birth of Old Li's child, Old Wang's visits brought her to the domestic space of Old Li's home. Her presence interfered with Old Li's role as wife and mother, causing Old Li's husband to treat the relationship between the two with hostility. The climactic break that occurs between Old Li and Old Wang is evidence of the ultimate unsustainability of the relationship.

It is only when the two women speak of their intimacy in the *public* setting of a park that the discussion of the relationship goes to an extreme and causes an irreparable rupture between the two. Sitting in the park with Old Li's child, whom Old Wang regarded as her godson, the two women hypothesize what would happen if they were both to fall in love with the same man, so deeply that neither would give up the man for the other. Old Li suggests that the solution would be to "kill the man," which moves Old Wang to tears. Suddenly, Old Li's child falls from his carriage and is injured, resulting in an argument between the women that damages their relationship irreparably. Previously, when the women conversed in private about their intimacy and the depth of their friendship, the conversations were not disruptive because they did not

place the relationship in opposition to the public. In other words, they did not rule out the socially-mandated and therefore public role of mother or wife. However, this public conversation and the hypothetical murder of man was, through the injury of the child and resulting break of friendship, symbolically ruled out as incompatible with the role of mother held by Old Li.

The central conflict in “Brothers” arises “between women as [individual selves] and the norms that they are expected to subscribe to” (Zhong 1993, 166). In the story, the female characters’ commitments to traditional female roles in which they are bound to males prevent them from achieving authenticity and maintaining self-exploration. Although they acknowledged the fact that their bondage to men restricted them, they were never able to envision an alternative beyond their close same-sex friendship, which ultimately could not be sustained. Furthermore, their very definition of man and woman stemmed from the understanding that the two were inevitably tied together. When asking themselves what a man was, they conclude simply that “man was the natural companion of a woman” (“Brothers”, 113). However, whenever they further question the roles of men and women, the women end up just as, if not more, confused than before. Their gesture of challenge against gender norms and roles was thus embodied “by the collective expressions of the desire [to be more than ordinary women]” which in turn generated “a desire to transcend confusion” (Zhong 1993, 166). Crucially though, the gesture of challenge and their exploration of alternative relationships and roles is shown to be fundamentally incompatible with the roles of wife and mother. The women are never able to remove themselves from these socially-mandated roles in a lasting way. Brief periods of intense connection and self expression were possible when the women were separate from the men and when they abandoned traditional feminine duty, but their roles as wife and mother made complete escape impossible, as demonstrated by the departure of Old Three and the rupture that

occurs between Old Li and Old Wang. This illustrates that, despite not being very “feminine” in behavior or temperament, the women in the story are still restricted by normative notions of feminine duty and female social roles.

“Brothers” highlights the fact that oppression and limitations placed on women are enforced at a societal level. These limitations prevent women from accessing potential sources of strength such as female-female bonding. This commentary comes across vividly as Old Wang’s husband reflects on what he describes as an “unusual force” in his wife. He remains confident, however, that his wife would not be able to tap into this force, which he seems to understand would disrupt the norm if released. He believes that “the flood would stay within the dam,” not because she herself was “rational” enough to contain it, but rather because “he knew that this dam was formed not by her rationality alone, but also by many people’s rationality, including his own” (“Brothers”, 197). This “rationality” can be interpreted to mean an understanding of and conformity to societal standards. This sentiment is reflected in interviews with Wang Anyi in which she argues that the hardship faced by women is not necessarily because of sex, but rather “because so many things remain unsatisfactorily resolved in the process of social development” (Zheng 1993, 168).

The social critique provided by this story is significant in that it highlights the damaging consequences of specific social norms and practices while also illuminating the difficulty of breaking from these norms given their deep roots in many individuals “rationality.” However, the story is not exclusively pessimistic about the possibility of resistance against these harmful norms. Despite the fact that the women in “Brothers” are unable to escape completely from their socially-mandated feminine roles, the story still demonstrates the subversive potential of close female-female relationships. While on the surface the story is about failed friendship between

women, the story actually “reveals the dark secret of the patriarchal system: intense friendship and love among women are subversive” (Zhang 2000, 168). One can therefore read the failed attempt to escape as a commentary on the damaging nature of social norms and ideologies that also hints at vulnerabilities within the system.

The women’s failed friendship reflects an element of modern discourse on female homoeroticism noted by Fran Martin (2010). Through an analysis of popular contemporary Chinese media representations of female homoerotic desire, she argues that intimate (though especially physical or sexual) relations between women can only be imagined in the past, with rare exceptions in the present, but never in the future. This is certainly applicable to “Brothers”’ idealized nostalgia for the intimacy of the “brothers”’ college years, the turbulent efforts to sustain the intimate relationship in adulthood, and the impossibility of sustaining the relationship long-term. Martin describes the common narrative trajectory in which same-sex love plots are superseded by socially mandated heterosexual conclusions—again, the parallel to “Brothers” is clear. However, Martin sees utility in this narrative pattern, and she argues that it facilitates an open acknowledgement by readers of the pain and regret that accompanies such an ending. The ambivalent or tragic ending therefore does not argue for the impossibility of female same-sex intimacy in the future; rather, it implies “a critique of the social imposition of hetero-marital relations upon young women as a condition of feminine adulthood” (Martin 2010, 7). Though this reading is especially pertinent to “Brothers,” but it applies in a more general sense to the difficulties characters in the following texts face in their efforts to achieve fulfillment and intimacy with other women.

The discussion of female same-sex bonding presented in “Brothers” is in many ways reflective of central concerns for many people in China in the late 1980s, including how women

can or should imagine themselves and their possibilities in the rapidly changing Post-Mao society. Because of this, “Brothers” differs in several key ways from the other works that I will analyze in this chapter. For example, whereas Chen Ran and Lin Bai are known to “expose topics viewed as taboos by orthodox morality” including “unconstrained and accurate treatment of one’s own sexuality [and] an incredible outspokenness not only about sexual intercourse between men and women, but also [between women]” (Pozzi 2004, 6), Wang Anyi does not explicitly address sexual desire between women in “Brothers.” In fact, as Patricia Sieber argues, the bonds between women in the story “do not offer an alternative sexualized identity; rather, they offer relief from the sexualized identity of wife and the subordinated category of woman” (Sieber 2001, 23). The works of Chen Ran and Lin Bai touch upon female sexuality more explicitly. This can be explained in part by the sexualizing trend in literature in the 1990s, but also reflects the different aspects of Chinese society and culture that these at which these authors direct their critiques. For Wang Anyi, the focus is on the limits imposed on women by society, both with respect to the possibility of forming vital same-sex bonds and the possibility of exploring the self and female subjectivity following an era of radically diminished discursive space within which individuals—especially women—could articulate their experiences or imagine possibilities for their lives.

Chen Ran’s “Breaking Open”: Radical Potential Realized

“Breaking Open,” a short story published in 1995, describes the journey of two women, the narrator Dai’Er and her “friend” Yunnan (between whom there is an implied homosexual relationship), who travel together by plane from the rural hometown of one to the urban home of the other in order to establish a women’s association that strives to create of a society truly free of gender discrimination. Dai’Er and Yunnan subordinate questions of gender to questions of

humanity, as exemplified by this statement spoken by Yunnan:

We must say that becoming indifferent to sexual difference is an advance in the culture of humankind. We are first of all persons, and only secondarily women. Some men always draw attention to our sexual difference, while they feign a deep respect; actually, behind this facade, they hide sinister intentions, namely to shelve, to lay aside, and to neglect us women, to leave us out in the cold, to not know us--it is a carefully disguised sexual hostility. This enmity, be it innate or acquired, is sometimes so well hidden that they themselves are not aware of it. In future generations, the greatest war will arise because of the divide between the sexes ("Breaking Open", 52).

Through the characters' dialogue, what Sang (2003) refers to as Chen Ran's "gender transcendent consciousness" becomes clear. One can read this "gender transcendent consciousness" as a reaction to the gender essentialism and "feminine consciousness" characteristic of the late 1980s.

In their effort to achieve freedom from gender discrimination and to transcend consciousness based on sexual difference, Dai'Er and Yunnan decide they must avoid both the rhetoric of Chinese-style "women's consciousness" and Western-style "feminism." Their aim is to "shatter the long-standing, well-established, and exclusively male rules and standards that pervade life," to reject the simplified image of woman "carved out by the hard brush of male writers," and to salvage their intellectual history from "male specialists of the 'woman question'" ("Breaking Open", 55). The name that Dai'Er and Yunnan choose for their women's association, "Breaking Open," speaks to the radical break from dominant discourse, both Chinese and Western, that the women see as necessary to bring about real change.

Waiting to board the plane, Dai'Er and Yunnan discuss their vision for the women's association along with their views on gender, sexuality, and society. Interspersed with their dialogue, Dai'Er reflects on her relationship with Yunnan, many aspects of which echo the values set forth by the two women for their women's association. For example, Yunnan's statement about the importance of becoming indifferent to sexual difference is complemented by

Dai'Er's personal reflection about her own experience of discarding the socially-sanctioned gender specification for a companion for herself:

Early on in my extravagant hopes, I was sure that this predestined person was a man—wise, gallant, and handsome. Later, I discarded the gender specification; I realized that the concept that a woman can or must only wait for a man is an age-old but coercive custom. To exist in this antagonistic world... a woman must choose a man in order to join the 'majority,' to be 'normal.' It is a choice that comes from not having any choice. However... I feel that an affinity between two people does not only appear between a man and a woman but that it is indeed also a kind of latent vital energy that has long been neglected among us women... ("Breaking Open", 55).

Similarly, Yunnan asks Dai'Er, "Don't you think that when we are together it is as if there were no sexes?" ("Breaking Open", 59). Just as in "Brothers," female bonding in this story provides a means for women to move beyond the limitations imposed upon them by society and dominant discourse. However, whereas "Brothers" ended with the relationship between Old Li and Old Wang in ruin in order to emphasize the damaging nature of societal limits placed on female bonding, the vitality of the relationship between Dai'Er and Yunnan illustrates the possibility of transcending the coercive philosophies and values passed on through custom, including the gender specification of one's romantic partner. The relationship simultaneously denaturalizes social norms and demonstrates their tendency to hinder women from forming potentially vital connections. I will return to Chen Ran's positing of a romantic consciousness that does not concern itself primarily with sex or gender in my analysis of *A Private Life*.

Upon boarding the plane, Dai'Er and Yunnan discuss what they would do if they realized they had only one minute left to live. Dai'Er answers that she would tell Yunnan that she loves her, and Yunnan responds that she would kiss Dai'Er. This hypothetical situation directly calls into question the social norms that would prevent such action from taking place. Yunnan asks, "Why is it that only men can kiss women? Why can only they kiss you?" Dai'Er answers, "...having lived until this historical moment, there are really no longer any restrictions. This is an

era that seems to be made out of glass: many rules will be shattered for sure, one after the other, by the sound of steps leading forward” (“Breaking Open”, 65). Since this conversation takes place as the plane leaves the runway, it suggests forward progress while also symbolizing disconnect from reality as Dai’Er falls asleep and shifts her narration from reality to dreams. It is interesting that both “Brothers” and “Breaking Open” utilize hypothetical scenarios to explore the possibilities for women’s bonding; this maneuver invites further probing into what limitations or opportunities are imaginable for subversive women.

In Dai’Er’s dream, she tries to articulate her feelings to Yunnan, but the plane crashes before she has a chance. In the afterworld, Dai’Er meets an old woman, who tells Dai’Er that she must return to the real world to keep Yunnan company. As the woman speaks, she hands Dai’Er a string of white stones and remarks that their individually ordinary nature is transformed into a precious brilliance when strung together. Upon waking, Dai’Er describes the dream to Yunnan, who is shocked and reveals that the woman Dai’Er described in the dream was in fact her mother. Upon landing in Dai Er’s hometown, Dai’Er passionately exclaims that she wants to stay with Yunnan and “face the world” together, to which Yunnan agrees and the two link hands. Dai’Er reaches her free hand into her pocket and realizes that her hand is touching the stones given to her by Yunnan’s mother in the dream. This maneuver abruptly bridges dream space with reality, and suggests that female-female intimacy is not limited to fantasy.

Analyzing the symbolism of space within each of these texts is a method by which to locate specifically the social forces at which the authors direct their critique. The spaces within which characters meet resistance or find empowerment speak to the contexts in which certain subjectivities and desires are posited as viable or vulnerable. Whereas in “Brothers,” public expression of subversive desires is described as fundamentally incompatible with the roles to

which women are bound, “Breaking Open” argues for the potential reality of sustaining female-female relationships in *multiple* settings (the airport in Yunnan’s rural hometown, in transit, in a dream space symbolically linked to Yunnan’s mother, and finally in the urban hometown of Dai’Er) while also advocating for the radical potential of public female bonding through communities such as the women’s association.

“Breaking Open” offers a more nuanced and unarguably more optimistic vision of female-female intimacy than that of “Brothers.” The limits to female bonding posited in “Brothers” give way in “Breaking Open,” as the Dai’Er and Yunnan denounce oppressive norms and conventions in order to move forward and create a truly equal society. Furthermore, their relationship is not limited to the intimacy of friendship or sisterhood; in their dialogue, the women argue for the validity of same-sex intimacy that can be both emotional and physical. Though the women in this story confront significant obstacles in order to achieve freedom from dominant Western and male discourses and establish a place for themselves and their bonding, the project is not only argued to be possible, it is also approved by the dream manifestation of Yunnan’s mother. Chen Ran revisits the possibility of empowerment through female bonding in her novel *A Private Life*. However, in the context of the novel, female same-sex desire is only one facet of Chen Ran’s broader concerns: human nature and the intrusion of public forces into a private life.

Chen Ran’s *A Private Life*: Grappling with Public Influence on a Human Life

The novel *A Private Life*, published in 1996, follows the emotional and sexual awakening of Ni Niuniu (倪勃勃), whose name translates to “stubborn,” beginning in 1968 when Ni is eleven and continuing until her adulthood in the late 1980s. Ni experiences conflicts with figures such as her father and a male teacher Mr. Ti, intimate relationships with both men and women,

and ultimately a variety of tragedies that drive her to a mental breakdown. Following the breakdown and two years in a mental hospital, Ni withdraws from society and lives in a dreamlike state, reflecting upon her experiences and position away from the outside world. Ni's experiences and reflections demonstrate the myriad ways in which public events and ideologies register in the life and on the body of an individual, from dominant gender ideology and power relations to accidents and political events.

The gender transcendent consciousness seen in "Breaking Open" is readily apparent in *A Private Life*. Ni's love scenarios reveal a certain fluidity of desire that does not center on sex or gender. Interestingly, this story also illustrates the possibility of female sexual self-fulfillment, as the final sexual encounter in the novel is Ni masturbating to a fantasy that involves both her past boyfriend and the widow Ho. Ni's emotional, intellectual, and spiritual intimacy with the widow Ho forms a stark contrast to the unfulfilling experiences she has with her teacher Mr. Ti, who seduces her and leaves her feeling deeply unsatisfied and fooled. Ni finds solace through bonding and love with Ho, and the relationship provides her with a life-redeeming force that strengthens her in the face of turbulent changes as well as oppression and exploitation at the hand of male figures such as her father and Mr. Ti. Even considering the sexualizing trend in literature in the 1990s, Chen Ran's inclusion of female homoerotic desire is significant, as it posits the possibility of legitimate, autonomous female sexuality even in the absence of men. This directly confronts China's cultural prejudice against female sexuality, which delegates female sexuality to a passive role that hinges on the active sexuality of men. Ultimately, the fluidity of Ni's desire can be read as a critique of the myth that only heterosexuality can sexually fulfill a woman. The story ends, however, with Ni alone, all of her intimate relationships over. By ending the novel this way, Chen Ran places the emphasis not on the gender of Ni's relations or sexuality, but

rather on larger questions of human nature and reality.

Though Chen Ran does not emphasize gender to the same extent that Wang Anyi does in “Brothers,” *A Private Life* also touches upon the vulnerable and unequal position in which women often find themselves relative to men, and it illustrates the ways in which gendered power relations can inform the experience of women. For example, beginning early in her life, Ni is confronted with the unequal power held by figures such as her father and male teacher over women such as herself and her mother. By including this element in their works, these authors illuminate aspects of gender inequality rendered invisible by dominant discourses (such as state feminist discourses) about female liberation and equality. Chen Ran’s “gender transcendent consciousness” is therefore quite different from the “genderless ideology” of the 1940s to mid-1980s. The fluidity of Ni’s desire, and looking back, the “indifference” to gender specification referenced in “Breaking Open,” is not a *denial* of difference, but rather a subordination of the question of gender to a larger question of humanity and human nature.

In *A Private Life*, Chen Ran also deploys space to critique society and explore the unique situation of the narrator’s position within society. This can be seen most clearly in Ni Niuniu’s ultimate solitude in the end of the novel: she retreats to the private space of the bathroom in her home. This solitude, or “forced escape,” “conveys a criticism... against a society where women seem to have no chance” (Pozzi 2004, 6). It is interesting to contrast the privacy evoked both in the title of the work and the physical isolation of the protagonist with the very public nature of the events that drive her to madness and compel her to withdraw into isolation. The causes of the trauma that influenced her emotional and psychological decline include her mother falling ill and dying, a fire caused by a faulty refrigerator taking Ho’s life, politics drawing her boyfriend away, and a bullet piercing her leg due to politics and public agitation. In this way, Ni’s “private” life is

repeatedly penetrated by public events and her relationships disrupted by factors outside of her control. The interweaving of public and private calls into question the possibility of a truly private sphere. Additionally, Ni's withdrawal and self-exclusion from society can be read as "radical defiance of a state that has long encroached on private lives to the point of eliminating the private sphere," so that the pursuit of privacy takes on "the significance of a public act of resistance" (Sang 2003, 221).⁴⁰

Ni's madness and hospitalization are intricately linked to the idea of public penetration into the private, given that the events triggering her decline into emotional and psychological decline were beyond her personal control. However, her madness did not inhibit her ability to resist; in fact, it was during her mad rambling that Ni criticized society most sharply. In this way, Ni is not powerless at the hands of an inescapable public, but rather through her marginalization and trauma she is able to access profound insight into the plight of society and humanity in general. This madness as a form of insight resonates with modern writer Lu Xun's "Diary of a Madman," in which the protagonist seems paranoid and mad, yet is ultimately correct in his claims, thereby critiquing the society that would believe this character to be mad.⁴¹ If we read Ni's madness in the same way, many profound commentaries and insightful critiques about society emerge from her ramblings.

Ni's experience of madness is mentioned very early on in the story. She references a

⁴⁰ Interestingly, the concept of privacy evoked in this story is of Western import. Ancient Chinese viewed privacy (*si*, 私) as harmful and in direct opposition to the public (*gong*, 公). This is discussed in depth in Tuft, Bryna. 2013. "This is Not a Woman: Literary Bodies and Private Selves in the Works of the Chinese Avant-garde Women Writers." PhD diss., University of Oregon. For the purposes of this thesis, it will suffice to point out literary renderings of a private sphere as empowering or as a site of resistance is perhaps an example of how modernization has changed Chinese notions of the private.

⁴¹ See "Diary of a Madman" in Lu Xun, and William A. Lyell. 1990. *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

“friend,” a doctor, who has recommended medication for her “agoraphobia.” In response, Ni claims that she has no need for pills. However, toward the end of the novel, Ni loses touch with reality, denies the death of her mother, withdraws from society, and scribbles endlessly in journals. She is hospitalized and “cured,” although upon returning home she appears to have recovered only partially; she writes a letter to the hospital as evidence of her total recovery, but it is clear that the letter is a dramatic fabrication with no connection to Ni’s actual life or mindset. It seems that Ni sees reality clearly now, but she is still dissatisfied and detached, and it is obvious that she recognizes the disparity between the thoughts doctors want her to have and those that she actually has. Wounded emotionally and physically by the many tragic events she has experienced, Ni represents a woman, or perhaps more broadly, a person, vulnerable to circumstances and events beyond her own control. Furthermore, her hospitalization symbolizes institutional efforts to delegitimize her experiences and insights.

Prior to being hospitalized for her madness, Ni refers to herself as Miss Nothing, and she secludes herself in her room, where she writes and rambles nonsensically. Her writing addresses topics such as the necessity that lambs obey their shepherd, the unreality of herself and those around her, of money, of the relationships and power inequalities between men and women, and of the artificiality of an independent self. It seems that in this state of “madness,” Ni is finally able to make sense of the underlying forces beneath her many experiences of inequality between men and women, power differences between members of each sex, and even abuse at the hands of male authorities. Therefore, her rambling “illuminates the truth of women’s lives” (Schaffer & Xianlin 2007, 27).

When Ni is “cured,” she is able to acknowledge the truth of her life circumstances, including the death of her mother and Ho, and she begins to see her madness as a symptom of

her position within a fragmented world. According to Ni, “Every outward system is the product of a fierce conflict between a person’s inner needs and the realities of the world around them. It’s the same as symptoms of a physical illness. They are manifestations of the struggle within a healthy body against harmful influences to it” (*A Private Life*, 196). She further connects her experience to the state of humanity, and reflects that although she herself is a unique entity, she also represents what it is to be human. With these connections laid out plainly before the reader, the events of Ni’s life, her madness, and her ultimate failure to be completely “cured” are highly symbolic; they represent larger patterns in society and the possibility of seeing through them and perhaps resisting them. Similarly, the madness-induced criticisms of men and ramblings about an individual’s vulnerability within existing systems of power provide a clear and enlightened perspective on society and culture.

So far, the works discussed in this thesis have embodied their exploration and critique of aspects of post-Mao society in narratives about women in contemporary, urban China. *A Private Life* revisits the past by following the life of Ni Niuniu from childhood, yet it’s focus is on Ni’s psychological development and experience rather than the specific temporal location of the past itself. In “Seat on the Veranda,” however, Lin Bai brings the past to the foreground by looking back in time to a hazy, distant, and mysterious past in order to imagine a time and place without homophobia, and to analyze the ways in which certain attitudes and beliefs are socialized rather than natural.

Lin Bai’s *The Seat on the Veranda*: Reading the Past to Illuminate the Present

Published in 1997, this short story is narrated by a reporter who visits the town of Water Mill in 1982. While exploring the Zhang mansion, the narrator, Lin, meets an old woman named Qiye who has lived in the mansion since she was fourteen, at which time she began serving as a

maid to the Third Mistress, Zhu Liang. In Qiye's room, Lin sees a photograph of Zhu Liang, and she senses an "unusual" relationship between the two women. Suddenly falling ill, Lin stays for a few days in a hotel near the Zhang mansion, and in a dazed state she imagines the relationship between Qiye and Zhu Liang, in conjunction with memories and reflections from her own life. This narrative is juxtaposed with scenes from the political controversy centered on the owners of the mansion, the Zhang brothers, in the late 1940s. After recovering from her illness, Lin feels an urgent need to leave the town, and the reality of the past days' events is left ambiguous. The narrator's thoughts on the relationship between Qiye and Zhu Liang ultimately reflect her own socialized homophobia. In other words, her exploration of the past illuminates characteristics of present society, and the ways in which these characteristics contribute to the invisibility of experiences that do not fit with the dominant heteronormative narrative. This takes place alongside a critique of revolutionary or historical erasure of female sexuality and desire under Communism.

The main space of the story is the Zhang mansion, which at the time of narration is all but abandoned, but in the 1940s was the center of a political controversy and was in the process of being taken over by Communists, as the owner is charged with participating in a counterrevolutionary plot. However, throughout the story, the political narrative remains peripheral and does not disrupt the dominant narrative, which centers on the narrator's interaction with and reflections on Qiye. Given the dismissal of femininity and sexuality (especially of homosexuality) during China's revolutionary period, it is significant that the highly politicized space of the mansion is the setting for female sexuality and same-sex intimacy to play out. In addition to challenging collective memory by suggesting the possibility of unwritten histories and of desires and experiences not addressed by dominant heteronormative

narratives, it also asserts a marginalized form of female sexual desire and emotional experience as primary over masculine political and national narrative.

The story does not emphasize the relationship between the two women Zhu Liang and Qiye; rather, it focuses on the narrator's reaction to their intimacy. Lin repeatedly reflects upon the intimate relationship and attachment between Zhu Liang and Qiye as unnatural and strange solely because the two are both women. The impossibility of the relationship, in Lin's eyes, can therefore be traced to a fundamental unwillingness or inability to see female-female interactions outside of a heterosexual frame. The story opens with Lin describing the way that Qiye responded when asked about a photograph of Zhu Liang. Qiye's voice is described as "filled with nostalgia, like that of a doddering man remembering an undying love from his youth..." (Lin 2003, 83). Lin's reaction to the photograph is revisited later in the story, and Lin acknowledges that "if Qiye had been a grimy old man, surely I wouldn't have been so startled by the sight of a woman's photograph by his pillow. A man (whatever his age or situation in life) keeping a memento of a woman (whatever her age or station in life) evokes a beautiful, romantic fantasy" (Lin 2003, 95). Yet because the two are women, Lin can only conclude that there is something "unusual" between them. In this sense, Lin is conscious of her own homophobia and heteronormativity, yet she is unwilling or unable to transcend it.

Juxtaposed with descriptions of Qiye massaging and bathing Zhu Liang (and Zhu Liang's moans of pleasure), the narrator recalls the shame and embarrassment she experienced as a student when she was naked in a public bath house:

I learned early on that the scariest thing up north is not coldness but bathing. The very thought of removing her clothes in front of other women reduces someone from the southern provinces... to desperation... I went to college in a city in the northern region of the Chinese heartland... [and when] I thought of standing in [a bathhouse] without clothes on, I was gripped with fear. What exactly is this thing: beauty, or one's own body? (Lin 2003, 100)

The narrator's past experiences of fear and embarrassment prevent her from understanding what Zhu Liang and Qiye experience together, and she is unable to shake her disturbance at the intimacy between the two. This juxtaposition between the pleasurable and dreamlike descriptions of Zhu Liang's bathing and the narrator's own experiences of fear in the bathhouse demonstrates the ways in which the narrator's internalized homophobia informs her perception of the relationship and prevents her from appreciating the tenderness shared between the two women. Moreover, it demonstrates the ways in which the narrator's homophobia generates shame, confusion, and embarrassment about her own body and the bodies of other women. Through this narrator, then, Lin Bai illustrates the manifold consequences of socialized homophobia: experiences outside of the norm are rendered invisible, opportunities for understanding and empathy break down, and individuals take on an unnecessary burden of shame and confusion with regard to their own bodies and sexuality.

Discussion

Although all of these texts share the common characteristic of addressing female-female bonding, intimacy, or desire, they approach the topics in different ways. The differences among the texts speak to shifts in the dominant discourses and concerns in China between the 1980s and 1990s, though they also reflect the authors' differing priorities and concerns regarding gender and sexuality. For Wang Anyi, female bonding allows exploration of feminine consciousness that is not linked to sexual identity. In the case of Chen Ran, sexuality is primarily a means of exploring human nature and desire, although it also illustrates the author's views on homosexual rights. Lin Bai uses female sexuality as a means to explore themes such as unspeakable desires and lesbian marginality. Tracing a trajectory of the emerging discourse of female homoeroticism, it seems that as the reality and possibility of subversive and non-normative desires became

increasingly accessible in the 1990s, pessimism about the possibility of female-female intimacy shifted to optimism,⁴² which motivated further attempts to use these subversive forms of intimacy to critically examine the nature of society. Increasingly, intimacy between women was not confined to a state of impermanence or impossibility in public imagination. In fact, in *A Private Life* and “Seat on the Veranda,” the imaginability and validity of these female-female relationships was central to the delivery of the texts’ social commentary and critique through the stories’ tragic endings.

Through these stories, the personal is discursively connected to the social, political, and historical dimensions of Chinese society, culminating in pointed social commentary and critique that challenges both traditional and contemporary patriarchal discourse and practice. In this way, these literary works exemplify indigenous or alternative feminism, as described by Yang (1999) and Schaffer and Song (2009). Through the medium of creative writing, these writers are able to shed light on the ways in which State feminism and the project of women’s liberation has made invisible certain aspects of gender domination. For example, these stories address the consequences of male dominance over women (both physical, political, and social), the burdens of the domestic sphere, and the silencing of female desire and marginalization of female bodies and subjectivities. These themes are obscured by State feminist discourses of equality and female liberation. In addition, by emphasizing the specifically Chinese history and context of these critiques, the writers do not allow their efforts to be glossed over by pre-existing Western feminisms. By bringing these critiques into the public sphere, these texts open up channels of communication by which existing prejudices, norms, and social scripts can be evaluated and challenged. This act of contestation has consequences for *tongzhi* women with regard to the

⁴² Of the four works discussed in this thesis, “Breaking Open” is the most overtly optimistic. This is perhaps not surprising, given that its year of publication, 1995, was the year that the Fourth World Conference on Women was hosted in Beijing.

possibility of community and relationship formation, as well as the possibility of making life choices outside the social norm.

Chapter Four: Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

Female same-sex desire in literature, once ideologically limited and denied depth, has transformed in the 1980s and 1990s to encompass the possibility of specifically homoerotic and romantic female same-sex desire. The discourse on female homoeroticism in contemporary Chinese literature has emerged through a combination of multiple historical and social forces. The discourse is increasingly transnational in nature, and the possibility of multiple reading practices is surfacing in China's broadening public sphere. Within this broadening space, local and global professional readers alike are contributing to the discourse, as are nonprofessional or nonacademic readers.

My original analysis of several representative works within this discourse centered on the topics of femininity and female sexuality, the possibility or impossibility of female-female intimacy, and the symbolic significance of space within the texts. I have argued that a critical way in which these texts intersect with the social reality of female *tongzhi* is the ways in which the literature confronts social prejudices with regards to gender and sexuality and consequently influences the public imaginability of female same-sex desire. For example, texts that argue for the legitimacy of active female sexuality (even in the absence of men) confront prejudices about the necessary passivity of female sexuality, which "contributes to the symbolic erasure of female homosexuality in public imagination," and in turn directly affects the development of female *tongzhi* communities.⁴³ Furthermore, by addressing the limiting and oppressive nature of certain female roles, these texts also open up lines of communication about ways in which societal expectations about family, marriage, and motherhood can be problematic. This is especially significant given the fact that societal pressure to marry and reproduce is one of the most

⁴³ Kam 2005, 5

disruptive forces cited by female *tongzhi*.⁴⁴

Though the focus of this thesis is the discourse on female same-sex desire emerging in the 1980s through the late 1990s, it is important to emphasize that the discourse has continued to grow and develop to the present. While the literature discussed in this thesis touches upon issues and topics relevant to the female *tongzhi* community, the authors have not claimed these texts explicitly as *tongzhi* fiction. Identity politics is not a central theme in these texts; rather, female intimacy or homoeroticism serves as a site for authors to make broader social criticisms and commentary. However, the global spread of lesbian identity politics facilitated the emergence of local movements and communities beginning in the 1990s, resulting in a “boom” in the number of representations of female homoeroticism in recent years.⁴⁵ These more recent cultural productions about and by the *tongzhi* community therefore offer rich ground for future studies.

Many of these works the *tongzhi* community directly, such as Lucetta Yip Lo Kam’s ethnographic work *Shanghai Lalas* (2013). This ethnographic study discusses the transnational nature of female *tongzhi*, or more colloquially *lala* (拉拉), communities, the dominant challenges that these communities must confront, and the methods with which members of these communities confront these challenges. Independent documentaries such as *Queer China*, *Comrade China* (2008) by Cui Zi’en discuss homosexuality in China in depth, focusing on the research and work of leading LGBT activists and scholars of the field. Another noteworthy work is mainland China’s first film broaching the topic of Chinese lesbian relationships, *Fish and Elephant* (2001). From the emergence of works such as these, it is apparent that non-normative gender and sexuality are increasingly open to discussion and are making themselves visible in

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Martin, Fran. “Introduction: Love and Remembrance”. *Backward Glances: Contemporary Chinese Cultures and the Female Homoerotic Imaginary*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

public culture. As such, there are many directions for future research that I would like to propose.

For the scope of this project, it was necessary to limit my analysis to works published by authors in mainland China. However, cultural production by and about *tongzhi* individuals and communities in Taiwan and Hong Kong would certainly be a fruitful area for further study, as these areas have a distinct political and cultural history from the mainland. For example, some writers in Hong Kong have taken advantage of their “lack of ready-made national affiliation and the absence of engrained literary traditions” to produce richly innovative work (Sieber 2001, 9). Taiwan’s literary representations of homoeroticism include more elements of lesbian identity politics and explicit feminist ideology than its counterpart in the mainland, with a burgeoning field of lesbian literature complementing its lesbian and feminist activism.⁴⁶

Online homoerotic fiction and blogs may also prove to be meaningful sources of analysis. Websites featuring *tongzhi* fiction or personal experience are not subject to the same market forces that limit print publications, and they are also less subject to censorship. As such, analysis of these works or personal narratives in the form of blogs may speak to the social reality of *tongzhi* individuals and communities in ways not possible for mainstream fiction. The anonymity afforded by the Internet may also prove to facilitate more transparent self-expression. This possibility is explored in recent research by Yowei Kang and Kenneth C. C. Yang, who argue that Gay and Lesbian blogs in China provide a public space for marginalized minorities to engage in the rhetorical concept of “reversed silence.” According to Kang and Yang, this rhetorical strategy can allow marginalized voices to be heard and can facilitate the development

⁴⁶ Sang, Tze-lan. 1999. “Feminism’s Double: Lesbian Activism in the Mediated Public Sphere of Taiwan” in *Spaces of Their Own: Women’s Public Sphere in Transnational China*, ed Mayfair Mei-hui Yang. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

of collective homosexual consciousness and resist the misunderstandings that prevent the development of a positive homosexual sensibility in Chinese culture.⁴⁷

Another potential direction for further research would be to continue tracing the trajectory of this discourse for works published in mainland in the 2000s and up to the present. Such works could include Anni Baobei's "Endless August" (2001), the film *Fish and Elephant* (2001) by director Li Yu, as well as two novels by self-identified lesbian women in Shanghai, Zhang Haoying's *Shanghai Wangshi* (2003) and Hailan's *Wode Tianshi Wode Ai* (2007). This project would be particularly meaningful given several key developments for China's *tongzhi* community that took place in the early 2000s, such as China dropping homosexuality from the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders in 2001 and Yi Linhe proposing same-sex legalization to the National People's Congress in 2003.⁴⁸ As new questions about *tongzhi* or LGBT identity continue to circulate in China's public sphere, the discourse surrounding female homoeroticism in literature will certainly continue to develop as well.

Literary renderings of female same-sex intimacy and desire by writers such as Wang Anyi, Chen Ran, and Lin Bai take on the project of creating a space for others to assert their agreement and that women, even those with nonnormative desires, might claim for themselves a legitimacy both within the elite literature (which is still a masculine-dominated space) but also within broader society. In this space, there is room for subversive desires and subversive intimate relationships, such as those between two women. By influencing public imagination and increasing awareness of issues pertinent to female *tongzhi* individuals and communities, China's

⁴⁷ Kang, Yowei and Kenneth C. C. Yang. 2009. "Gay and Lesbian Blogs in China: Rhetoric of Reversed Silence in Cyberspace". In *China Media Research*, 5(1). 21-27.

⁴⁸ Cui, Zien. 2009. Li Yinhe's proposition was rejected, and many LGBT activists and scholars do not see same-sex marriage as the means of salvation for *tongzhi*. In fact, many look upon same-sex marriage as a submission to state control. Li Yinhe's proposition, however, demonstrates the emergence of a political movement that is actively concerned with the rights of those holding the identity of *tongzhi* or LGBT.

emerging discourse on female homoerotic desire in contemporary literature contests the boundaries that confine *tongzhi* women in society.

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