# Identity, Multiplicity, and Resistance in Taiwanese Poetry

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### Queer life and its pressures

For queer individuals, life poses special difficulties. Especially if they grow up in conservative environments, which remains the case in most of the world, they grapple, first, with the hurdle of recognizing and accepting their own same-sex desires and then, sooner or later, with the daunting challenge of explaining to their parents that they are attracted to others in the "wrong" way. Their journey is further complicated by hostile school environments in which classmates readily bully anyone who deviates from sexual or gender norms and use. Any traits that fall outside narrow, conventional definitions of gender roles—liking the wrong toys, playing the wrong games and sports, walking or running differently, even carrying their books in the wrong way—attract slurs such as sissy, weirdo, homo, pervert, fag, and so on that stigmatize and dehumanize them. In such an atmosphere, expressing romantic interest in classmates becomes a minefield of uncertainty, and queer individuals often grow up dreading the potential repercussions of disclosing their true feelings. The looming specter of rejection or, worse, physical harm casts a shadow over their social and romantic interactions, prompting many to suppress their desires. In the face of all this social stigma and shame, many queer young people internalize feelings of unworthiness and unlovability. They feel isolated from others and disconnected from society. In extreme cases, they come to hate themselves, which can manifest in toxic psychosocial responses such as self-harm, suicidal ideation, and, tragically, suicide itself.

Even in adulthood, queer individuals often grapple with pressure to conceal their identities and can feel uneasy about disclosing their sexuality even to friends and loved ones. Fearing the stigma of failing to conform to social norms, they may feel compelled to marry and have children, all while hiding their true selves in the "closet." In professions such as politics, law enforcement, or the military, where traditional gender norms are highly esteemed, queer individuals often live in fear of discrimination or dismissal. In countries where legal, religious, or cultural frameworks foster homophobia and transphobia, openly identifying as gay makes them constantly feel susceptible to harassment or even violence. Where legal protections against discrimination

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based on sexual orientation or gender identity are lacking, same-sex partnerships are treated unequally in taxation and financial matters such as property ownership and inheritance rights. Without the right to jointly own property or make decisions about shared assets, gay couples face uncertain futures. In such environments, when one partner dies, the survivor usually cannot automatically inherit and may be left destitute. Many jurisdictions also impose significant barriers to adoption, fostering, co-parenting, or surrogacy on same-sex couples who want children.

## Queer temporality

The relationship of everyday life to normative pressures deeply influences how time is perceived. Individuals whose sense of themselves conforms to conventional norms and expectations tend to experience time as a teleological dimension that unfolds linearly through a series of orthodox milestones—schooling, graduation, marriage, the births of children, professional advancement, and so on. In contrast, the social identity threats faced by queer individuals often prompt them to actively shape a different experience of time. Like Walter Benjamin's "Angel of History,"[1] they often find themselves looking backward rather than forward, perceiving time as a series of catastrophes, with the wreckage of the past accumulating incessantly and time propelling them, facing backward, into the future. Memories of childhood bullying, adolescent self-abasement, and the loss of friends to suicide or AIDS haunt them with a pervasive fear of premature death, further influencing their perception of temporality. This fear often leads to prioritizing the fleeting *jouissance* of the present moment. In jurisdictions where same-sex relations remain illegal, queer individuals are routinely subject to harassment by police and the risk of detention or imprisonment even in spaces of supposed freedom such as gay bars and private parties, and where gay and trans rights are legally protected, homophobic and transphobic harassment and assaults, as well as more subtle expressions of stigma, still happen frequently. Moreover, queer individuals who opt not to conceal themselves by marrying and having children thereby forsake the forward-looking perspective that children necessarily induce in parents.[2] Consequently, they are often perceived—and perceive themselves—as having "no future" and even living in a kind of opposition to time.

The difficulties of queer temporality are intertwined with the difficulties of queer affect, which are predominantly conceptualized in terms of negative emotions. Despite the strides made in queer visibility through pride movements, human rights activism, and the legalization of same-sex relationships in an increasing number of countries, the past remains more than a mere historical construct for queer individuals—it is a lived reality that continues to shape their present and future. The burden of social stigma, discrimination, and marginalization leaves an indelible imprint, making it challenging to move forward without feeling tethered to the past. This perpetual rearview gaze often evokes feelings of living "backward," as if trapped in a cycle of retrospection

that hinders progress and growth.[3] It fosters a sense of melancholy, stemming from a deep awareness of the injustices and hardships that have been endured. Lack of understanding and empathy from a heteronormative society further exacerbates feelings of alienation, self-hatred, self-abasement, inferiority, insecurity, anxiety, and shame. In facing these myriad negative emotions, queer individuals must navigate not just the external challenges but also the internal struggles that arise from social rejection and the internalization of negative social attitudes toward their identities.

For similar reasons, conceptualizing queer history is also difficult. The modern history of the queer experience in Taiwan is a prime example. One can easily anchor Taiwan's overall trajectory since the end of World War II in generally accepted milestones such as the February 28 Incident of 1947, the retreat of the ROC to Taiwan and the declaration of martial law in 1949, the first direct presidential election in 1996, and so on, though interpretations of these events can vary, with some historians opting for more radical anchoring points. In any case, in this History with a capital "H," periodizations typically revolve around key incidents such as the death of Chiang Kai-shek in 1975, the Formosa Incident in 1979, or the lifting of martial laws in 1987, which everyone can recognize as turning points. When it comes to writing queer history, however, the lack of clear delineations or widely recognized milestone markers makes the task much more problematic. Unlike the relatively straightforward narrative of Taiwan's modern history, queer history can seem fragmented or unintelligible. Many significant events in queer history appear inconsequential to most people, making it difficult to establish a cohesive narrative. Some may remember the tragic deaths of two lesbian schoolgirls, Lin Ching-hui (林青慧) and Shih Chi-ya (石濟雅), briefly making headlines in 1994 after they took their own lives in a hotel room or the mass arrests, on July 30, 1997, of gay men on Changde Street (常德街) that sparked debate on gay cruising and social spaces, but the narratives of queer individuals themselves are often defined by smaller, more intimate "deviant" moments that pass unnoticed by the broader, well-disciplined social radar of the mainstream. Moreover, the very nature of queer history is inherently intersectional, intertwined with other aspects of identity such as race (Chinese mainlanders or Taiwanese islanders), gender (gay, lesbian, or transgender), and class. This complexity adds another layer of difficulty to the task of writing queer history, as it requires a nuanced understanding of how various forms of oppression intersect and shape individual and public history.

## Difficulties of queer literature

These multiple difficulties—social and political discrimination, reverse temporality, backward-facing affect, and illegible historiography—all contribute to the difficulties of queer literary writing in Taiwan. Trailblazers have no established precedents or canonized literary works and films to guide them. They must envision depictions of homosexual desire from their own experiences,

but fear, anxiety, and melancholia often grip them when it comes to portraying gay eroticism in their works. Constantly looking backward like the Angel of History, unable to envision a brighter future or embrace the slogan "it gets better," they see queer life through the lens of broken families, self-exile, and suicide. To counteract unjust social judgment and stigmatization, they may strive to portray the experiences of the LGBTQ+ community with ethical integrity, but also must navigate the constraints of straight social norms and expectations. They must contend with a legacy of erasure and invisibility and fight to claim a place in literary history that will give future generations of queer writers more opportunities to thrive. They may struggle to find publishers willing to take a chance on their work or face resistance from literary gatekeepers who call them "immoralists" or fail to see the value in queer narratives. They worry about being labeled as perverse, fear intrusion into their private homosexual lives by curious readers or even the possibility of blackmail threats.

Because of these emotional and existential intricacies, queer literature is *inherently* difficult regardless of the language or form of any particular work. A queer poem may well be linguistically or formally "difficult," but its true difficulty arises from the challenges of queer *life*: the inability to envision a clear future, to sustain positive emotions, or to align with grand historical narratives that exclude nonheteronormative experiences. Thus, when a queer poem is linguistically or formally difficult, that difficulty is both a reflection of and a response to the marginalization that queer individuals face in society. Poetic difficulty, in this sense, traces a drift into the "unmeaning, unknowable, and unspeakable" residing at the heart of poetry's tension between "what can and cannot be said."[4] The feelings of alienation and disconnection that many queer poets experience are mirrored in their verse, offering a space where personal and collective histories blur. Queer poets often create work that articulates shame, stigmatization, and trauma, seeking resonance with a broader community while simultaneously fearing its intrusive gaze, its misinterpretations, and its slanders. Thus, the difficulty of queer poetry can also be understood as its persistent exploration of the "epistemology, ontology, and phenomenology of nonheterosexuality," making it not just a form of artistic expression but a mode of survival and resistance against heteronormative frameworks.[5] Just as a "difficult" person may be deemed so because of being stubborn, uncompromising, rebellious, or confrontational, poetry will be considered difficult when, as is often the case with queer poetry, it refuses to conform to social decorum, accept convention, or submit to heteronormative moral authority.[6]

Paradoxically, this very refusal is what enables queer poetry to thrive. Unwilling or unable to accommodate easy interpretations or straightforward messages, queer poetry often employs a diverse range of voices, from the outrageously imaginative to the earnestly self-questioning, the playfully provocative to the openly appropriative.[7] Its preference for multiple, shifting tones and styles reflects the fluidity and multiplicity of queer identities and challenges "heteronormative bodies" and "chrononormative narratives" that define

sexuality and human experience in rigid terms.[8] In this way, difficult queer poetry subverts the linearity and predictability of traditional poetic forms as one part of the way it disrupts the ease with which society categorizes sexual and gender identities. It defies the straight reader's expectations not just in content but in form and language. In navigating the complex, elusive dynamics of identity and otherness, pain and pleasure, abjection and redemption, shame and pride, queer poetry's difficulty becomes a powerful signal of rebellion. Its very complexity points to the inherent instabilities of sexuality both as lived experience and as historical construct. Ultimately, the difficulty of queer poetry is therefore its strength, enabling it to reflect the multifaceted nature of queer existence.

In this chapter, I examine the various forms of difficulty inherent in queer poetry through a focused analysis of four poets: Ko-hua Chen (陳克華, 1961–),[9] Ching Hsiang Hai (鯨向海, 1976–), Sao Hsia (騷夏, 1978–), and Yeh Ching (葉青, 1979–2011). I identify four distinct manifestations of queer difficulty: queer provocation as a means of challenging stigmatization, queer humor as a defiant response to the longing for connection, understanding, and stable identity, queer anxiety in the negotiation of family history and personal desire, and queer melancholia in the struggle with love and self-recovery. Although each poet's work contains elements of all four strategies, I focus only on the most prominent one in each of their oeuvre. In the work of all four, however, the strategy that I highlight enables the poet to transform the personal and social challenges of lived difficulties into complex aesthetic practices that construct alternative perspectives on queer temporality, emotionality, and history while simultaneously contributing to an epistemology of nonheterosexuality and a poetics of difficulty. My discussion aims not only to illuminate how their poetry reflects broader struggles within the queer community but also positions their work as foundational to future developments in queer literary expression.

## Ko-hua Chen: queer provocation

The origins of queer literature in Taiwan, if we must pinpoint a starting point, can be traced back to Kuang Tai's (光泰, 1946–) novel *The Man Who Escapes Marriage* (逃避婚姻的人, 1976). Imbued with queer melancholia, it is both a heartfelt plea for social tolerance and a resounding call to dismantle the stigmatization fostered by Western psychiatric theories. The novel's pervasive air of loss and longing reflects the emotional landscape of its characters, highlighting the impact of social rejection on their lives. A few years later, Pai Hsien-yung's (白先勇, 1937–) magnum opus *Crystal Boys* (孽子, 1983) extends the concept of queer melancholia into themes of rejection and exile, bravely unveiling the haunting realities of gay men living in perpetual fear of sexual and political persecution during the era of martial law. The characters' alienation and despair are deeply intertwined with the overall melancholic atmosphere of the novel, highlighting the temporal and affective dimensions of their struggles. Their

aspirations for a conventional career or life are constantly thwarted by social rejection, compelling them to survive through sex work.

In their explorations of queer melancholia, *The Man Who Escapes Marriage* and *Crystal Boys* not only reflect the historical and emotional contexts of Taiwan's queer community at the time but also illuminate the intricate interplay between identity, temporality, and resistance in queer literature. It was within this melancholic atmosphere of resistance against social oppression that Ko-hua Chen began his quest to explore the essence of homosexual love through poetry. One of his earliest poems, "A Whale-Riding Boy" (騎鯨少年, 1979–1980), beautifully articulates admiration for a bronzed young man who is melancholic but nevertheless fearlessly straddles a whale. Another remarkable example of his work is the epic poem "Notes on a Planet" (星球記事, 1978–1980), which ingeniously employs a science fiction backdrop to convey the poignant narrative of unreciprocated love for a straight friend. Difficult to interpret due to its use of a non-linear, flashback narrative structure to convey the narrator's bittersweet memories, it further resists interpretation through an intricate, unconventional use of sci-fi tropes to explore the dilemma of homosexual love in a time of repression. The cyborg narrator, for example, in blurring the boundaries between humanity and machinery, is an allegory of the poet's experience of queer identity as monstrous and revolutionary, deconstructing conventional notions of gender representation and difference. These early works employ a variety of other strategies to veil the narrator's gender and sexuality and to substitute themes of innocent friendship for overt homosexual fantasy, but discerning readers equipped with their own "gaydar," were able, as Ko-hua Chen intended, to perceive the undercurrents of homosexual desire that permeated these poems.

During the 1990s—a decade notable for the emergence of queer novelists like Chiu Miao-chin (邱妙津, 1969–1995), Chi Tai-wei (紀大偉, 1972–), and Wu Chi-wen (吳繼文, 1955–), as well as the poet Lin Tse-liang (林則良, 1967–) with his collection *Practice with a Snake* (與蛇的排練, 1996)—Ko-hua Chen removed his veil and came out through his poetry, shifting his focus from hints and symbols to explicit homosexual erotica. Like other queer Taiwanese writers of the 1990s, he still navigated a society that, despite political liberalization, remained intolerant and cruel in many respects, and he used his poetry to articulate the queer community's burgeoning defiance of heteronormativity and its desire to confront the discontent and melancholia imposed upon it by straight society. The pervasive social repression faced by queer Taiwanese—and the deep-seated sense of loss, frustrated desires, and resistance against social norms that this produced—must surely have been a driving force behind Ko-hua Chen's development of his provocative new "camp style." By embracing ostentation and exaggeration, he transforms his anger into a powerful form of artistic insubordination. His new style intentionally showcases what "respectable" society considered obscene and blasphemous, subverting conventional ideas about high art and "beautiful" poetry and shocking heterosexual readers out of their complacency. Through this approach, he not only

confronts oppressive social expectations but also creates a space where queer identities and experiences can be boldly and unapologetically celebrated.

The collection *Decapitated Poetry* (欠砍頭詩, 1995) exemplifies this style in its bold challenges to sexual conservatism and hypocrisy. Composed under the shadow of the HIV pandemic, its outrageous (and difficult) poem "The Necessity of Anal Sex" (肛交之必要, 1992) urges heterosexual men to explore the pleasures of sodomy without shame.

> we wake from our resplendent
> opening night
> to find that a back door has been left unlocked,
>
> to find that wombs and bowels are essentially the same room,
> separated only by a tepid wall:
>
> we dance among the aphrodisiac flowers in bloom
> our limbs unfolding tenderly, our skins
> in contact, two brand-new species touching:
> before the mortal storm of history,
> not even Freud could have predicted our bliss:
>
> *we are a brand-new species*
> *exempt from poverty athletic injury and AIDS*
>
> let us expose our asses and our consciences alike:
> naked under a light-focusing magnifier
> ready for inspection:
> observe us twitching like rats
> empathize with our painful joy
> our body hair so blood-soaked it looks like someone
> has spilled a bottle of red hair dye over us:
>
> oh, will we ever have the luck
> to prove the necessity of anal sex
> within in our short lifespans?[10]

In the face of a pandemic that threatened to destroy the queer community, the poem embraces the present moment and celebrates *jouissance*—in the Lacanian sense of a profound, often transgressive form of pleasure and fulfillment.[11] Ko-hua Chen portrays gay men's "unlocked back doors" as an invitation for *straight* individuals to explore and challenge rigid gender identities. Homosexual encounters are likened to "twitching rats," simultaneously despised and yet irresistibly captivating to curious onlookers. The poem's ecstatic depiction of homosexual bliss deliberately provokes straight

voyeuristic curiosity, not merely to shock but to expand understanding of alternative forms of sexual pleasure. "The Necessity of Anal Sex" stands as a landmark of queer difficulties in Taiwanese literary history; it is one of the first works of Taiwanese literature to reject social norms outrightly, expose the hypocrisy of straight culture, and unapologetically embrace queer, perverse, and exhibitionist desires. In doing so, it foregrounds a marginalized form of homosexual jouissance that had previously been denied utterance in society.

Ko-hua Chen's later serial poem, "Body Poetry" (身體詩, 2005–2006), continues this provocation by representing male erogenous zones—tongue, chest, nipples, and calves—as entities deserving liberation from abstinence and ripe for fetishization. The poem is both an erotic exposition and a critique of heteronormative bodies, which the poet considers mundane and utilitarian, devoid of any potential for fetishistic engagement. The poem's "queered" male chest is depicted as evoking the serene image of sailing on a tranquil sea, while the nipples are likened to poached eggs, tempting the poet to savor their allure. The belly button has the singularity of a black hole, and the backbone is portrayed as a means of facilitating face-to-face intimacy. The genitals are a "country where all humans are equal," reflecting the universality of their erotic potency.[12] Among these, the poem "Thigh" (大腿, 2006) uses nostalgia to vividly evoke the paralyzing entrancement that the backward gaze produces.

Back then, the men
would go to heaven to bathe.
I was a child.

Their thighs were a forest
I traveled through,
pagoda bedposts
so large and thick that
I could barely hold on to them.
Then I practiced climbing,
hanging from the horizontal bar.

I felt the warm mist from the mountains
like a hot spring erupting over me.
The smell was that of ancient, masculine sweat,
a pheromone that urged me
*grow up soon, kid—*

In the end, I completely lost myself
in the forest of thighs.

I am still lost there. Even today
I am compelled once again

to search the canopy
for loaded, swollen fruit.[13]

In memory, the narrator revisits a public bath as a child and relives the experience of gazing at the naked men there, captivated not only by their masculine scent and sweat but also by their physical presence. He is entranced, perceiving their thighs as the trunks of trees and their testicles as swollen fruits. However, he eventually acknowledges that this "daddy" fantasy now prevents him from imagining a future for himself, trapping him in an eternal, longed-for past. His desire has transformed into a queer melancholia characterized by a persistent, unrealizable nostalgia. He is an eternal son, "lost" in the erotic longing experienced in the bathhouse.

Over the years, Ko-hua Chen has earned a reputation for the diversity of his exploration of queer themes. His work encompasses the portrayal of the posthumanist/queer body in the serial poem "Twelve Love Poems for an Android" (寫給複製人的十二首情歌, 2009–2010), the application of Buddhist philosophy to same-sex love in "Male Love Sutra" (男男愛諦, 2008), and incisive critiques of homophobic bigotry in "Everyone Loves to Swallow the Bread of Life" (人人愛吃零涼糖, 2011) and "The Necessity of Bestiality" (獸交之必要, 2013). While his erotic poems delve unashamedly into fetishism, kinkiness, and, at times, perversity, offering a multifaceted exploration of human desire and intimate connections, by contrast, his straightforwardly romantic work, often drawing inspiration from Buddhist philosophy, illustrates with great tenderness how homosexual love can attain a purity, sacredness, and conceptual depth. Other works satirize the absurdity of the Christian crusade against legalizing of same-sex marriage. Across his poetic career, Ko-hua Chen has fearlessly advocated the beauty of queerness and fought against the stigmatization of homosexual desire and expression. All of his work reflects, in one way or another, a conviction that there is no intrinsic distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality and urges readers not to react with surprise or disgust to queerness. Much like his day job as an ophthalmologist, where he corrects eyesight, Chen the poet works diligently to expand and normalize the "vision" of queerness through his explorations of "difficulties." He has been an indomitable advocate and a fearless pioneer, championing the cause of LGBTQ+ rights with unwavering determination and a daring sense of adventure and inclusion.

### Ching Hsiang Hai: queer humor

Ching Hsiang Hai gained acclaim in the early 2000s, following Ko-hua Chen's early groundwork, for his exploration of innovative imagery as diverse as computer screens, toilet bowls, and muscular physiques. Daring and unconventional in his approach and style, he brings slang and colloquialisms into Taiwanese poetry to create a postmodern fusion of high and low cultures. His poetry ventures into themes that encompass the splendors of youth, the

intimacy of brotherhood and gay love, and the anxieties of coming out. In contrast to Chen's work, which often aims to provoke conservative readers with frank depictions of the full range of queer desire, Ching Hsiang Hai's poetry, like a form of humanistic psychotherapy,[14] nurtures a healing mental landscape through a joyful poetics, offering a compassionate and welcoming space for readers of all sexual orientations. His poetry embodies a world rich with deep and complex sensibilities, inviting readers to explore the diverse tapestry of human experience that defies the privilege of heteronormativity, and his style is characterized by humor, playfulness, parody, and a touch of what can best be described as "cuteness." Through often whimsical narratives, he explores non-heterosexual, alternative spaces and temporalities that offer endearing, affirming glimpses of gay intimacy in bathhouses, fitness centers, swimming pools, parks, and scout camps.

In contrast to Ko-hua Chen's erotic intensity, Ching Hsiang Hai addresses queer difficulties in a tone that is cheerful and innocent—and often whimsical, even hilarious—avoiding emotional heaviness or anything that could be seen as obscenity. The poem "Dragon Boat Exercise" (龍舟練習, 2012), to illustrate, describes the brotherhood and virility of paddling a boat together: "In the Sunshine / we take off the shirts for each other / Our gazes sweeps like a mini-typhoon / The peak of summer / released from our speedos / is lively and hardy."[15] Phrases like "the peak of summer" and "hardy" subtly suggest male arousal without being explicit, transforming the unspeakable from taboo into naivety, making this particular queer "difficulty" visible yet delicate. Similarly, in "Hey, Classmate!" (這位同學, 2009), the narrator, after walking his straight friend home, expresses his sexual intentions but masks them with irreverent humor.

> "Today's sea is so beautiful,"
> I chant this to a cat three times
> while my cheeks blush slightly like waves
> Suddenly, I want to hop off the bus, turn back
> get to your place, and jump you
>
> Muscles and skeletons in the breeze
> feel touched together
>
> In terms of nudity
> I will be honest
> I will remember to close the door[16]

Despite the seeming delicacy of his feelings, the relentless surge of sexual longing nearly compels him to retrace his steps, enter his friend's space, and seek a forbidden moment of intimacy. In this imagined encounter, he becomes acutely aware of his friend's physicality—the contours of muscle and the firmness of bone—and is forced to confront his own suppressed desires. These

impossible longings—loving a straight person and indulging in fantasies of intimacy—demand discretion, however, symbolized in the poem by the promise to close the door and conceal these imaginary, stolen moments from the prying eyes of heteronormative society. As here, Ching Hsiang Hai's signature style renders homosexual difficulties in a manner that resonates deeply with gay readers while remaining accessible and non-alienating to straight audiences. His method underscores the hidden difficulty of a queer love that often unfolds under the guise of brotherhood, where the boundaries between friendship, eroticism, and fantasy blur into uncertainty even for the participants themselves.

The most formidable queer difficulty has always been the act of coming out, especially within a family. In a traditional Taiwanese family, the father wields authority over his children and has the power to shape their destinies. He is expected to approach this role with unwavering seriousness, assuming responsibility for his children's education, intellectual development, and moral guidance until they attain maturity. A son, in turn, is expected to embody the paternal figure's imposing image, gleaning from it the attributes necessary to marry, assume the role of father, and ensure the continuation of the family lineage. In Ching Hsiang Hai's "My Father's Spirit" (父親的幽靈, 2006), the narrator poignantly describes how, even after his death and transformation into a spirit, the father exerts this pressure on his son, who says: "If I do not have/ a son / I will never be the kind of spirit / that my father expects."[17]

In "For Your Fathers" (致你們的父親, 2012), Ching delves into the imagination of a son disclosing his homosexuality to his father.

Father, can I confess to you?
I am g—
Just how much do we have in common?
Could you also be g—?
If one day I fall in love with a man like you
will you be able to forgive me?
Trapped in a mossy, overgrown city
traveling from a fitness center to a swimming pool
while emotion pours from the eyes
my body suddenly blossoms
how can I possibly stay quiet?
"I love you"
is never an affair buried between us
What kind of lover have I had behind me?
What kind of lover would wish to lie beneath me?
Don't you want to know? I am your son
but also your comrade in the fires of war
Please let me, for the first time
be so alive
My green youth going to the colorful bloom

could evaporate at any moment
Father, can I confess to you?
The storm ahead will not cease
The man who loves me arrives
He is wet to the skin, like you
and gently dries my body[18]

The son begins with a tentative plea, "Father, can I confess to you," conveying a sense of vulnerability and contrition and a fear of rejection. The unspoken word "g—" underscores the stigma and difficulty of coming out as gay, reflecting the son's internal conflict, as if the word is sticking in his throat. The poem intertwines themes of familial similarity and shared identity, as the son wonders if his father might also be gay, revealing not only a daddy-son erotic fantasy but also a deep yearning for connection and understanding. The plea to "let me be [. . .] alive" suggests the difficulties of living a queer life, including the potential for being unlovable and the possibility of an untimely death. The metaphor of the body blossoming signifies the son's emerging sexual identity and the struggle to remain silent about it. Throughout the poem, the narrator expresses a desire for open love and transparency and seeks acceptance of his true self. The relationship with the father is redefined as one of solidarity and shared struggle, likening their dynamic to comrades in battle. This metaphor emphasizes the intensity of the son's internal conflict and his need for paternal support. The fleeting nature of youth and the urgency of living authentically are underscored by the imagery of "green youth" transitioning into a "colorful bloom." The poem culminates in the arrival of a lover, whose wet skin parallels the father's, suggesting the son's hope for acceptance and love. This climactic moment of tender care contrasts with the anticipated storm of rejection, encapsulating the son's longing for understanding and affirmation from his father.

Ching Hsiang Hai's "difficult" poetry, particularly his exploration of father-son relationships and the challenges of coming out, poignantly captures the essence of queer identity within a traditional Taiwanese context. In the face of stigmatization and intolerance, he employs humor and playfulness imbued with profound emotional depth, crafting a distinctive style that resonates with a wide-ranging audience. His depiction of homosexual desire is marked by cheerfulness and innocence, steering clear of obscenity while subtly conveying erotic undertones. This approach allows his work to bridge the gap between gay and straight readers, fostering empathy and understanding. His work eloquently captures the multifaceted difficulties of being queer, balancing the whimsical with the profound, and advocating for a deeper understanding of human intimacy and identity. Through his innovative imagery and fearless exploration of difficult topics, he invites readers into a world where the complexities of love, identity, and familial relationships are explored with sensitivity and candor. His ability to blend lightheartedness with serious themes allows his poetry to resonate widely and make a significant impact on both queer and straight audiences alike.

**Sao Hsia: queer anxiety**

While gay poets like Lin Tse-liang and Ko-hua Chen gained prominence in the 1990s, lesbian poets did not achieve similar visibility until the new millennium. This delay is likely due to women's greater reluctance to come out and the additional challenges they face in a male-dominated literary and publishing landscape. Sao Hsia emerged toward the end of the 2000s as one of Taiwan's pioneering lesbian poets through her collection *Endangered Animals* (瀕危動物, 2009), an ambitious work characterized by a difficult and often obscure presentation. Many poems are presented with minimal context, making them challenging for readers to fully grasp. Despite this difficulty, it is evident that the author delves into her struggles with coming out, traces her family history, and confronts her desires with unflinching honesty. The title symbolizes the difficulty of homosexual individuals who cannot have children, likening them to a species on the brink of extinction. It also reflects the isolation lesbians often feel in their search for partners, poignantly captured in the evocative epigraph: "Every pore in my body is afraid of you / but also misses you very much."[19] This line encapsulates the tension between fear and longing, themes that permeate the collection. Additionally, the book intertwines her parents' personal histories with Taiwan's sociopolitical context, offering reflections on traditional Chinese gender perspectives as a means of constructing the poet's gender identity. The collection vividly portrays "queer anxiety," illustrating the sense of isolation and disconnection from official histories, reflecting a deeper anxiety about being alone and without a recognized place within the broader narrative.

To locate her queer position beyond official history, the poet chooses to explore her own family history. She employs the metaphor of "lifting the wedding veil" to reveal her father's personal history, a potent image that signifies a deeper transgression of gender stereotypes. Traditionally, lifting a wedding veil symbolizes the revelation of a bride's face to her husband, a moment of exposure and vulnerability. By applying this metaphor to her father, the narrator challenges conventional gender roles, suggesting that her father's past, like a bride behind a veil, has been obscured. Unveiling in this context not only reveals his personal history but also exposes the difficulties and contradictions within his identity. He resisted pressure to learn standard Mandarin, engaged in fights with village peers, and became a legend within his clan. Despite being a Taiwanese islander proud of his identity and a witness to the February 28 Massacre, he unexpectedly chose to marry a Chinese mainlander. Sao then extends the metaphor of lifting the wedding veil to reveal her mother's history, adding another layer of complexity to the narrative. The poet recalls that her mother, once a young woman full of potential and dreams, was a Chinese mainlander living on Taiwan's Cijin Island and, unlike the stereotypical image of a bride, a hardworking laborer who commuted daily to and from Kaohsiung City by ferry. The poet vividly remembers a harrowing incident from 1973 when the ferry sank, claiming the lives of twenty-five female workers. Her

mother narrowly escaped this tragedy, an event that profoundly impacts Sao's understanding of fate and survival. The thought of her mother potentially dying young, without the chance to marry or have children, evokes a sense of vulnerability and loss.

The metaphor of "lifting the wedding veil" serves as a tool not only to explore the hidden complexities of her parents' lives but also to draw parallels with the experiences of queer individuals. The exploration of her parents' microhistory mirrors the challenges faced by queer individuals, who, like the poet's parents, often navigate identities that defy simple categorization. The metaphor of lifting the veil thus becomes a broader commentary on the effort to bring queer histories to light, revealing the difficulties and resistance of those who have lived in the shadows of social expectations. In this way, the poet's journey to understand her family's past is intricately linked with her quest to assert her own queer identity. By resisting grand historical narratives, the poet connects the petit histories of her parents to petit queer history. This approach underscores the shared difficulties of seeking recognition and acquiring the courage needed to resist conformity and highlights the importance of personal and collective queer experiences.

In "My Sister Hatches Eggs" (妹妹孵蛋, 2009) and "At Least in My Lifetime, When Her Eyes Meet Mine" (至少在我和她四目相接的有生之年, 2009), Sao Hsia turns to the contrasts between heterosexual and homosexual experiences. In "My Sister Hatches Eggs," the poet envies her sister, who, as a heterosexual woman, can "hatch an egg."[20] This envy is accompanied by a sense of inadequacy and exclusion from the traditional reproductive role and the normative expectations of heterosexuality. In "At Least in My Lifetime, When Her Eyes Meet Mine," she again contrasts herself with her sister, who is spared from all the emotional turmoil of coming out and shocking their parents. This same sister further suggests that the poet may not be a lesbian either, humorously implying that one's sexual orientation could be discerned from something as trivial as sleeping posture. This playful yet poignant comparison underscores the difficulties of navigating sexual identity within a heteronormative family structure.

Sao's prose poem "A Room with Toys" (玩具的房間, 2009) is an exploration of lesbian desire, intimacy, and the complexity of emotional and physical connection. It begins in a simple, childlike setting: "The room was not big. I had a lot of toys. We were all toys."[21] The reference to "toys" suggests the playful nature of the implied interactions in the room, hinting at the idea that the "children" involved are objects of each other's desires. The poem's portrayal of physical intimacy in this room is detailed and unflinchingly explicit, capturing the raw, almost primal nature of sexual desire:

> I embraced her and told her what had happened. She didn't know why she was so wet, and her innocence and embarrassment made me full of desire again. She was so swollen that I couldn't even get a finger inside her. She was swollen, humid and smooth, a hill. I couldn't help but

> explore. She was gushing. It didn't feel sticky this time. She said to me, it flowed again, this time from her ass, staining the sheet. I told her, it was okay.[22]

The description of the partner's body—swollen, wet, and reactive—emphasizes the intense physicality of the encounter. The repeated reference to "swollen" underscores the idea of fullness, perhaps symbolizing the overwhelming nature of desire that fills and consumes both women. The narrator's fascination with her partner's body, the "small, many-petaled flower" of her vagina, is both tender and possessive, reflecting the duality of love and lust:

> She said that she was still very swollen. I said that I might be able to help her. She said that her feet were stiff. She said that she would be so swollen after she ejaculated. I turned on the light and saw her vulva, purple and black. I gently bit her clitoris with the front teeth, which was too much for her. Her stomach spasmed and she squirted again. I clearly saw a tiny, intense spout going out of her little hole, then all of it flowing slowly. I opened her vulva, and her vagina was like a small many-petaled flower, the center of which produced transparent and thick honey that turned white when exposed to air. The small, pink many-petaled flower. I put my finger into it. The flower ate me up. Swollen.
>
> She said that she felt like she was sitting on my imaginary penis, which made me feel quite arrogant: the invisible was better than the real. She lay on top of me, shivering and shedding tears. Every time I brought her to climax, I would let her climb on me and sway. Because of my vanity, I tried my best to continuously stimulate her.[23]

The poem also touches on power dynamics within the relationship. The partner feels like she is "sitting on [an] imaginary penis," an image the narrator finds empowering—"the invisible was better than the real." This line suggests a subversion of traditional gender roles in which the narrator acquires masculine phallic power, but in a way that transcends and improves upon physical reality. The "imaginary penis" becomes a symbol of the narrator's control and influence, yet it is also intangible, highlighting the fluidity of gender and power in queer relationships.

Sao Hsia's poetry demonstrates how a queer individual challenges and complicates conventional narratives of identity and desire. Through her exploration of family history, gender roles, and intimate relationships, Hsia's poetry not only addresses the difficulties faced by queer individuals in a heteronormative society but also emphasizes the temporal and emotional nuances of queer experience. The metaphor of "lifting the wedding veil" serves as a tool for uncovering minor histories that may seem insignificant within grand history. It symbolizes the ongoing struggle to bring queer experiences to light, highlighting the importance of these smaller, often overlooked stories in the broader quest for recognition and understanding. Similarly, her depiction of

lesbian desire in "A Room with Toys" foregrounds the complexities of intimacy and power dynamics, offering a raw and honest portrayal of queer affect. These elements reflect the broader difficulties of constructing queer histories that resist simplification and embrace the multifaceted nature of identity. Hsia's work thus contributes to a deeper understanding of queer temporality and history, highlighting the resilience required to navigate and assert queer identities in the face of social expectations and historical erasure.

**Yeh Ching: queer melancholia**

Yeh Ching's poetic career embodies multiple difficulties of queer writing. Growing up in a family fractured by her father's infidelity and the resulting divorce, she escaped family turmoil by immersing herself in her studies and her poetry, only to be diagnosed with bipolar disorder during her second year of university. When her condition worsened, she was hospitalized and prescribed medication that, while necessary, dulled her senses and stifled her poetic inspiration. To reclaim her creativity, she sometimes went off her medication, which only worsened her illness. Despite these difficulties, Yeh Ching published two poetry collections that displayed an unconventional poetics quite distinct from the styles of her contemporaries, especially the male poets. She frequently employs metaphors such as rain, snails, alcohol, and cigarettes to delve into recurring melancholic themes of love, family, illness, pain, and loss. Her illness forced her into deep introspection, which fueled both her melancholy and her creativity. Love, in her work, is portrayed through the dual lenses of heartbreak and tender affection, with her simple verses reflecting a genuine project of self-examination. When writing about family, her emotional expression becomes more fragmented, however, reflecting the complex and broken nature of those relationships. Her thoughts on life and death are stark; she even wrote her own epitaph in advance, revealing her deep anxiety about life and her indifference toward death. Tragically, at the age of thirty-two, Yeh Ching took her own life.

The poem "Scar" (傷, 2011) explores themes of pain, healing, intimacy, and transformation, using vivid and visceral imagery to create a profound but shocking emotional and psychological landscape. It begins with the narrator reflecting on her self-inflicted wounds, speaking to herself as if she were a close friend: "You cut your forearm / leaving two dark red scars, long and wide."[24] This line establishes a tone of violence and trauma, with the scars symbolizing both physical and emotional pain. The narrator applies an ointment despite knowing its futility: "I take the ointment I know it won't help."[25] This act reflects a desire for healing or comfort, or going through the motions, even though the scars run deeper than any superficial treatment can reach. The narrator's longing to "tuck my hand into your body" signifies a desire for an intimate connection, not of a sexual nature, but one that seeks to soothe and understand the underlying pain.[26] This gentle engagement with wounds and difficulties implies both compassion and an awareness of their ferocity. The

comparison of touching the wounds to "wild beasts" meeting the "warm sun after rain" suggests that the narrator's touch, or presence, brings a calming warmth to these otherwise untamed and violent scars.[27] Although this connection temporarily soothes the "wildness" of the wounds, the scars remain. The final lines, "the moment I withdraw from your body I am also a snake / shedding my old beloved skin," introduce a theme of transformation.[28] Connecting with the other person's pain and then withdrawing changes the narrator as well. Shedding skin is a powerful image, symbolizing renewal, growth, and letting go of something old and cherished. Through this engagement with her own wounds, the narrator undergoes a personal transformation, leaving behind an "old beloved skin," perhaps representing a past self or way of being that is no longer needed after this profound experience.[29]

The poem "When We Discuss Melancholy" (當我們討論憂鬱, 2011) explores the complexity of melancholy, questioning and expanding how this emotion is typically understood. It can be interpreted through the lens of "queer melancholia," a concept that explores the unique and often marginalized experiences of sorrow, loss, and longing within the queer community. Queer melancholia reflects the struggles of living in a society that fails to recognize or validate queer identities, leading to a persistent sense of grief that is both personal and collective. Here is the poem:

> When discussing melancholy
> we always name it blue
> but why is there no red melancholy
> as clear as the sunset's blood
> coloring the whole sky?
>
> When discussing melancholy
> we always say it is a mood
> but why is there no physical depression
> that longs for someone but can only see her back shadow?
> I know my eyes and hand are not allowed to touch
> I feel myself redundant
>
> Red physical melancholy
> is a severe illness destined for my life
> not fatal, but hard to be healed[30]

The poem begins by questioning why melancholy is typically associated with the color blue and not, for example, red. This challenge to the conventional "blue" image of melancholy sets the stage for an exploration of why queer affect is generally excluded from mainstream narratives of emotional expression. For Yeh, *red* melancholy, intense, vivid, and all-encompassing—"coloring the whole sky"—symbolizes the pervasive nature of queer melancholia, not a passive, quiet sadness but a powerful, active emotion that reflects

the unrecognized pain within the queer experience. She then questions why melancholy is typically considered an emotional state—a "mood"—and wonders why it is not recognized as a physical condition too. The idea of physical, embodied depression suggests that queer melancholy manifests in the body, not just the mind. The image of longing for someone but only seeing her shadow conveys a sense of unattainable desire, reinforcing the physical dimension of this melancholy. The realization that they "are not allowed to touch" and the feeling of redundancy resulting from this highlight the isolation and helplessness that accompany this kind of melancholy, emphasizing its tangible, almost oppressive presence. The poem concludes by identifying queer melancholy as a "severe illness destined for my life." This acknowledgment of melancholy as a chronic, almost inevitable condition resonates with the ongoing, pervasive grief that afflicts so many queer individuals due to social rejection and unfulfilled desires. This melancholy is "not fatal, but hard to be healed," as a persistent, unresolved, paralyzing sorrow and sense of loss.

## Conclusion

This study has explored the intricacies of queer temporality, affect, and historicity in the works of four Taiwanese queer poets, Ko-hua Chen, Ching Hsiang Hai, Sao Hsia, and Yeh Ching, whose poetry reflects not only the vulnerability of queer individuals but also the broader sociopolitical landscapes they navigate. Each poet, through their distinct voices, highlights the inherent difficulties of writing queer literature—difficulties that emerge from social rejection, internal conflict, and the challenge of documenting marginalized histories. Ko-hua Chen's "difficult" poetry challenges social decorum, deliberately confronting stigmatization through queer provocation. His work resists social conventions, exposes the hypocrisy of heteronormativity, and pushes the boundaries of eroticism and queer identity. Ching Hsiang Hai, on the other hand, infuses his poetry with queer humor and playfulness, using these gentler strategies to illuminate the struggles of queer love and identity in a softer, healing light. His work, though lighthearted, speaks deeply to the anxieties and tensions that arise from navigating queer experiences in a heteronormative world. In contrast, Sao Hsia delves fiercely into the realm of queer anxiety in poetry that reveals her deep-seated fear of the isolation and erasure of queer experience in mainstream discourse and official histories. Her poetry emphasizes the existential challenges faced by queer individuals, particularly lesbians, in constructing a sense of identity in a male-dominated, heteronormative society. Finally, Yeh Ching's work argues for the physical, embodied, and comprehensive nature of queer melancholia, capturing the emotional depths of love, loss, and the struggle for self-recovery. Her poetry, particularly through its depictions of mental illness and familial estrangement, reflects the persistent sorrow and unattainable longings that shape much of the queer experience.

These poets also engage with queer temporality in ways that challenge the linear progression of time typically associated with heteronormative life

trajectories. For many queer individuals, life does not follow the traditional markers of birth, marriage, and reproduction. Instead, queer temporality often involves looking backward, confronting past traumas, and reliving cycles of rejection and loss. This backward gaze, in which personal and collective histories blur and the past is continuously re-lived as a site of unresolved tension, resonates in the work of each of these poets. Like many queer poets everywhere, they disrupt the conventional understanding of time by resisting the teleological narratives that define mainstream existence. Their work illustrates how queer individuals, often marginalized or excluded from official histories, construct alternative narratives that affirm their identities while resisting erasure. Moreover, the poets discussed in this chapter navigate the complexities of queer historiography. Making queer lives and queer history visible is an arduous task, as queer experiences are often fragmented and obscured by the dominant narratives of heteronormativity. These poets use their work to uncover and elevate these overlooked stories, contributing to a broader understanding of how queer individuals experience time, memory, and history. In conclusion, the works of these four poets offer invaluable insights into the challenges of queer existence in Taiwan. Through strategies of provocation, humor, anxiety, and melancholia, they create a poetics of difficulty that not only reflects the struggles faced by the queer community but also paves the way for future developments in queer literary expression.

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**Notes**

1. Walter Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 257–58.
2. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 3–4.
3. Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 4.
4. John Emil Vincent, *Queer Lyrics: Difficulty and Closure in American Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 1.
5. Vincent, *Queer Lyrics*, xv.
6. Jongwoo Jeremy Kim and Christopher Reed, "Introduction: Queer Difficulty, Difficult Queers," in *Queer Difficulty in Art and Poetry: Rethinking the Sexed Body in Verse and Visual Culture*, ed. Jongwoo Jeremy Kim and Christopher Reed (London: Routledge, 2017), 1.
7. Kim and Reed, "Introduction," 2.
8. Kim and Reed, "Introduction," 2 and 5.
9. I use the spelling "Ko-hua Chen" instead of the conventional Wade-Giles romanization "Chen Ke-hua" and the traditional sequence of the name to align with the name as it appears in his English poetry collection.

10. Ko-hua Chen, 欠砍頭詩 [*Decapitated Poetry*] (Taipei: Chiuko, 1995), 68–70. The translation can be seen in *Decapitated Poetry*, trans. Wen-chi Li and Colin Bramwell (London: Seagull Books, 2023), 17.
11. See Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *AIDS/Cultural Activism* 43 (Winter 1987): 197–222, https://doi.org/10.2307/3397574.
12. Chen, "Genitals," in *Decapitated Poetry*, 40.
13. Chen, "Thigh," in *Decapitated Poetry*, 43.
14. Ching Hsiang Hai works as a psychiatrist in his professional career.
15. Ching Hsiang Hai, 犄角 [*The Wanted, the Horny*] (Taipei: Locus Publishing, 2012), 54.
16. Ching Hsiang Hai, 大雄 [*Nobita*] (Taipei: Rye Field, 2009), 62–63.
17. Ching Hsiang Hai, 精神病院 [*A Mental House and Other Poems*] (Taipei: Lotus Publishing, 2006), 233.
18. Ching Hsiang Hai, *The Wanted, the Horny*, 156–57.
19. Sao Hsia, 瀕危動物 [*Endangered Animals*] (Taipei: Fembook, 2009), 1.
20. Sao Hsia, "妹妹孵蛋" [My Sister Hatches Eggs], in *Endangered Animals*, 68.
21. Sao Hsia, "玩具的房間" [A Room with Toys], in *Endangered Animals*, 140.
22. Sao Hsia, "A Room with Toys," 140.
23. Sao Hsia, "A Room with Toys," 140–41.
24. Yeh Ching, "傷" [Scar], in 下輩子更加決定 [*More Determined in My Next Life*] (Taipei: Dark Eyes, 2011), 183.
25. Yeh Ching, "Scar," 183.
26. Yeh Ching, "Scar," 183.
27. Yeh Ching, "Scar," 183.
28. Yeh Ching, "Scar," 183.
29. Yeh Ching, "Scar," 183.
30. Yeh Ching, "當我們討論憂鬱" [When We Discuss Melancholy], in *More Determined in My Next Life*, 19.