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Queer Narratives in Contemporary China: An Analysis of Homosexual Experience in Mu Cao's Work

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Citation

Mazzei, E. (2024). *Queer Narratives in Contemporary China: An Analysis of Homosexual Experience in Mu Cao's Work*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Queer Narratives in Contemporary China: An Analysis of Homosexual Experience in Mu Cao's Work

MA Asian Studies

Chinese Studies (120 EC)

Academic Year 2023-2024

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Word Count: 14969

(Footnotes and bibliography included)

Date: July 1st, 2024

*To my Grandma,
Who didn't even finish elementary school,
But taught me how to ride a bike, tie my shoes
and to dream.*

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Acknowledgments

This thesis concludes my chapter here at Leiden University. Out of all the projects that I've undertaken throughout my academic career, this Master's thesis was definitely the most challenging (and yet the most rewarding) one. It only feels right to find some space for those who have supported me in these years.

First of all, I want to thank my supervisor, Professor Maghiel Van Crevel, for believing in me enough to suggest I embark on this project and who has offered me both feedback and encouragement. A special thanks also goes to Mu Cao, for sharing his art and life with me. And finally, a big thanks to the man I think of as my menthor: Professor Fiorenzo Lafirenza.

The biggest thanks goes, however, to my chosen family, the people who have been there through thick and thin and whom I love to bits.

To Lorenzo Donelli; I shared so many laughs, cries, milestones and perhaps one too many embarrassing moments with you. I am so excited for the next chapter in your life, I will always be one phone call away, trying to cook soup and failing miserably.

To Kevin Zaganjori, my Taiwan 哥们儿; this thesis would not be as complete if it wasn't for the many articles you've downloaded for me.

I met you two by chance in a fake Beijing and you have accompanied me through the Piadena-Tornata-Remedello axe, Venice and Taiwan.

To my soulmate, Martina Pasin; you found me at my worst and you quickly became a crucial part of my life. Meeting you was truly of the best things that ever happened to me, you taught me how to put myself first. I am extremely proud of who you've become.

To Francesca Zambelli and Azuel Galiotto who, even if merely two years older than me, love to think of me as their adoptive daughter. Your love for each other inspires me.

To my dear friend (Diletta) Letizia Portalupi, who has been stuck with me since our Bachelor's days at Ca' Foscari and who patiently proofread this thesis.

To my ride-or-die travel partner and platonic husband Enrico Tuijpp, whom I shared many 2AM mental moments with in Taipei, Japan, Vietnam, India and the Netherlands. Thank you for being my first Dutch friend, for always being mean to me and, most importantly, for bullying me into believing into myself.

Even though I've met you all fairly later in my life, I could not imagine not having you in it right now. There are no words to express my affection for you, but I shall try by saying this: my grandma would have loved you.

And finally, a small thanks goes to her as well, Mariella. It does not matter where I am, whenever I look up in the sky, I know that the brightest star is looking over me.

Note on terminology

Throughout this thesis, the terms "LGBTQ+ community" and "queer community" will be used interchangeably. These terms refer to individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other non-heteronormative sexual orientations and gender identities, including those who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity. The "+" symbol represents the inclusion of a diverse range of identities beyond the core acronym, acknowledging the fluidity and spectrum of human sexuality and gender.

It is important to note that the term "queer" historically had negative connotations and was used as a derogatory slur. The term has however been reclaimed by many within the community as an inclusive and empowering term that encompasses a broad range of non-heteronormative identities, thus justifying its use in this thesis.

List of abbreviation

Chinese Communist Party	CCP
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transexual, Queer/Questioning et al.	LGBTQ+

Introduction

A Male Hooker's Job Application

*This big hotel was hiring male hookers
So I prepared my flesh and went to interview
In a thick Cantonese drawl the boss said
About right for age and looks*

*He asked me how long I'd stay hard
and did I have seven inches
What about my rhythm going in and out
and could I last for an hour
Did I have the skills for giving head
and had I tried techniques of anal sex
Could I handle a threesome or more*

*Alas I was rejected
Gone the chance of kingly wages
Poor and out of work and full of dreams and writing poetry
Here I was impotent for the first time ever*

(Mu Cao, translated by Maghiel Van Crevel)

China's rich cultural heritage, deeply rooted in Confucian principles and traditional family values, has historically shaped social norms and expectations. However, as the nation embraces globalization and modernization, the discourse on sexuality is also changing. As Bao (2020, 43) phrases it: the newly invented gay and lesbian bodies manifest the hegemony of discourses of being modern. New and diverse sexual identities are becoming increasingly visible in the mainstream Chinese heteronormative society. The once hidden queer community is now refusing to be forced back in the shadows and is coming up with new ways to resist the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) control and censorship. The CCP, which governs China, exercises strict control over many aspects of society, including the suppression of dissent and regulation of cultural expression (Brady 2006, 58-59). In response to this, the queer community often uses literature and art as a vessel to express its sexuality (Cowley et al. 2016, 12) and assert its presence as a legitimate component of the broader Chinese social context.

One artist whose work captures the complex dynamics of being queer in modern-day China is Mu Cao (墓草), China's first openly gay poet. His avant-garde writing provides a striking portrayal of the homosexual experience, serving as a reflection of the social attitudes towards LGBTQ+ identities within various socioeconomic strata in the Chinese contemporary context. As a matter of fact, Mu Cao is also a *dagongren* (打工人; someone who sells their

labour) (Ngai 1999, 2) or battler, one of the hundreds of millions of migrant workers who left rural China to work in a metropolis; his oeuvre offers insight into his struggles as a member of both the LGBTQ+ and migrant workers communities, thus exploring the intersectionality within his lived experiences.

This thesis opens with a poem that was part of Mu Cao's literary debut; a set of poems that equalled a coming out as gay, which forever labelled him as the gay poet in the wider context of Chinese cultural production. "A male prostitute's job application" (应聘男妓) - originally published in the unofficial poetry journal *Scrutiny* (审视) – sets the stage for the exploration of his perspective on the intersection of sexual and socioeconomic marginalisation in contemporary China.

Research Question and Thesis Outline

In order to understand Mu Cao's cultural production within the socio-cultural context of contemporary China, I ask: *How does Mu Cao's writing portray the homosexual experience in contemporary China?*

To answer the aforementioned question, this thesis will be organised in four chapters.

The first chapter will delve into the broader socio-cultural context surrounding the queer experience in modern-day China; including relevant issues, challenges, and prevailing social attitudes. By contextualizing Mu Cao's work within this framework, this chapter aims to provide a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of homosexuality in China and how they influence Mu Cao's themes and narratives.

The second chapter will be dedicated to unravelling Mu Cao's intersectional persona. The aim of this chapter is to analyze how his lower-class experience influences and shapes the portrayal of queerness in his literary works. To do so, I will first provide a brief biographical overview of Mu Cao's life, upbringing, and education and later explore his position at the intersection of both the *dagong* and queer community.

In the third chapter, I will analyse the portrayal of the homosexual experience in Mu Cao's writing. Through a close examination of Mu Cao's work, I will explore the use of satire, parody, and black humour in relation to political dissatisfaction and its connection to the LGBTQ+ community; the thematic link between homosexuality and loneliness in social life and lastly the issues that arise at the intersection of homosexuality and being *dagong*.

Finally, the fourth chapter will reflect on the principles applied during the translation process as a lens on Mu Cao's artistic approach. By illustrating such principles and choices through concrete examples, this chapter will also offer an insight into the compromises between translation decisions and the author's creative expression.

Methodology

My research is centered on the literary analysis of Mu Cao's cultural production.

The primary sources for this thesis are his poems and short stories, along with earlier interviews and resources originally published on *www.poemlife.com*. I have also conducted a close reading of his work, with reference to literary theory and LGBTQ+ theory for critical analysis. Another primary source is the online correspondence I had with Mu Cao on WeChat throughout 2024. As Mu Cao personally shares his life experiences, there is a potential for distortion or imposition of a particular view. The act of storytelling is inherently selective and influenced by various factors, including the desire to present oneself in a certain light. For this reason, his account must be understood within the broader context of social pressures, personal biases and power relations.

In terms of secondary sources, I mostly rely on scholarly literature on Mu Cao (mainly by Hongwei Bao and Maghiel van Crevel) and on sexuality in Chinese contemporary society, such as Dr. Travis Shiu Ki Kong's work *The Sexual in Chinese Sociology*, as well as various writings on queer literature and poetry, including Bao's *Queer China: Lesbian and Gay Literature and Visual Culture under Postsocialism*. Resources I draw on include the MCLC Resource Center Publication and the special digital collection of unofficial poetry from China at Leiden University Libraries.

State of the Field

Scholarly literature on Mu Cao is just beginning to emerge, and includes research carried out by Hongwei Bao and Maghiel Van Crevel.

Bao's *Queer China: Lesbian and Gay Literature and Visual Culture under Postsocialism* (2020) devotes chapter 6 entirely to the figure of Mu Cao and explores intricate dynamics shaped by the intersection of queer culture and China's transition from socialism to neoliberalism, focusing on the underprivileged experience of the lower-class population. According to Bao, Mu Cao's Marxist-rooted poetry not only unveils the stratification within the Chinese queer community (Bao 2020, 129), but it also explores its resistance to neoliberalism. Bao's chapter also includes his first-hand experience at Mu Cao's poetry reading event, thus offering insights into the atmosphere, audience reactions, and the overall experience.

Van Crevel's *Walk on the Wild Side: Snapshots of the Chinese Poetry Scene* (2017) explores the complexities of the Chinese poetry publishing scene, navigating between the blurry boundaries of official and unofficial publications. Within this framework, Van Crevel touches on *Selected Poems of Mu Cao*, edited by the International Poetry Translation and Research Center, which emerges as a significant example of independent publishing. This self-published book features a graphic description of gay sex scenes, often in a context of denunciation of social injustice. Through this essay, Van Crevel unravels the complex dynamics of Chinese contemporary poetry scene and thus provides a clearer background for Mu Cao's work.

Van Crevel and Bao's upcoming entry on Mu Cao in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* series, titled *Chinese Poets Since 1949, vol 2*, anticipated for publication in 2024 or 2025, serves as another valuable source for my project. The manuscript provides a comprehensive account of Mu Cao's life, delving into his impoverished upbringing, educational challenges, and diverse employment history, and thus shedding light on the difficulties faced by marginalized individuals in Chinese society. Employing an intersectional approach to explore Mu Cao's life, work, and his impact on Chinese literature, Bao and Van Crevel's entry in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* reflects on the intertwining of queerness with issues of social class, geographical location, and the rural-urban divide in Chinese society.

Objectives and Significance of the Research

I first encountered the figure of Mu Cao while attending Maghiel Van Crevel's course “China’s New Workers and the Politics of Culture” at Leiden University. The intersection of migrant workers and subalternity at large with queerness in particular sparked my interest, leading me to question the apparent lack of recognition and acknowledgment of Mu Cao as China's first queer poet. It was this curiosity that stimulated my research, which aims to create more scholarly literature on Mu Cao within the context of contemporary China.

Through an in-depth exploration of Mu Cao's portrayal of the struggles faced by both LGBTQ+ and migrant worker communities, the significance of this research lies in its objective to contribute to the broader discourse on the evolving landscape of sex and sexuality in China.

Chapter One

Being Queer in Modern-Day China

The Chimney

*In a country where same-sex marriage is not legally recognized, I can only have fun with old
men
In a masked game
Having fun with them until I become an old man myself
Putting on reading glasses
Opening a book
Proofreading typos...*

*Yesterday, the yesterday of yesterday
those whom I have shared a bed with have all disappeared; they went on to impersonate the
husbands of women.
Searching for same-sex love
...Difficult! Difficult! Difficult!
I want to tear up this book*

And then burn it

*Away from the library
Away from the old man writing...
Will I ever have a home?
Continuing alone*

*Wandering in the skyscrapers stacked with [Chinese] characters, I shout out to my mother's
chimney in my native language, to let me remelt and be reborn once again.*

(Mu Cao, translated by Emma Mazzei)

In order to fully understand Mu Cao's literary contributions, it is first necessary to investigate the multi-layered sociocultural context in which he operates.

In this chapter, which will serve as a background to contextualise Mu Cao's framework and literary themes, I will conduct a review of recent scholarship and socio-cultural shifts to delineate relevant issues, challenges, and prevailing social attitudes that define and shape the queer experience in 21st-century China. The main purpose of this chapter is to provide a better understanding of the complex dynamics of homosexuality in contemporary Chinese society. By exploring both the contemporary Chinese queer experience and its historical evolution, I will analyse both Mu Cao's socio-cultural background and the ever-evolving landscape of sexuality in China.

1.1 Historical Shifts in Perceptions of Homosexuality

The queer experience in 21st-century China is a dynamic narrative shaped by a complex interplay of historical shifts, social attitudes, and governmental policies. The evolution of sexual discourse in the country has traversed a remarkable trajectory, transitioning from rigorous censorship of sexual subject matter, which started in 1949 when Mao Zedong declared the founding of the People's Republic of China (Cao 2021). This era of sexual repression (Larson, 1999, 424) lasted until the 1980s. After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, Deng Xiaoping rose as China's paramount leader in December 1978 (Murray and Nadeau 2016, 51), shifting the nation's focus towards economic development (Thornton and Xie 2016, 489). This shift is especially noticeable in the literature, media, and the market, where sexual content has gained unprecedented visibility, reflecting a departure from historically imposed taboos (Sigley and Jeffreys 1999, 50).

Another indication of this changing perspective is the “queering”¹ of the Chinese term *tongzhi* (同志). Notably used as an honorific to address fellow party members of the CCP during the Communist Revolution (1921-1949), this term evolved in the late 1980s to become a preferred alternative for referring to gay and lesbian individuals, fully capturing the essence of Chinese sexual minorities (Bao 2019a, 24-27).

Despite these advancements, the profound backlash under the Xi Jinping administration has demonstrated the continued volatility of LGBTQ+ visibility in China (Hsu 2024). From the imperial era to the present, the discourse surrounding sexuality has undergone a profound transformation that persists to this day.

It is firstly imperative to negate the idea that homosexuality is a modern invention in China, as ancient records trace instances of male homosexuality back to the Shang Dynasty², persisting through various dynasties (Li et al. 1992, 10). Behaviours that might be considered inappropriate were permitted as long as the man maintained his social obligations to the family and avoided excessive sexuality (Kong 2016, 497).

This historical tolerance of homoerotic practices ended with modernity (Hinsch 1990, 4): Chinese intellectuals, eager to embrace Western ideas and challenge traditional principles like Confucianism, subjected homosexuality to thorough scrutiny in the 1930s. Intellectual debates of this era delved into questions of morality (Kang 2009, 43-49), whether homosexuality constituted a personal or social issue and the possibility of a “cure” (Chiang 2010, 644).

Although traditional Chinese society regarded homosexuality as a behaviour rather than an essential identity, the introduction of a medicalized notion of homosexuality in China shifted

¹ “Queering” refers to a strategic approach that challenges heteronormative concepts

² The Shang (商) dynasty, also known as the Yin (殷) dynasty, is the oldest known Chinese royal dynasty. It ruled between the 16th and 11th centuries B.C.

its understanding as a behavioural aspect to an identity marked by a pathological label (Cao and Lu 2014, 842). This transformation took place within the socio-political context of Maoism, wherein discussions about sex and sexuality were commonly regarded as taboo. Homosexuality was viewed either as shamefully illicit or as an expression of bourgeois individualism originating in the West that was perceived as detrimental to collective welfare. The prevailing principles of hard work, frugality, and collective enthusiasm for the “New China”³ during the high-socialist 1950s constrained discussions surrounding love and sex, thereby reinforcing social norms and restrictions concerning sexual expression (Evans 1995, 358). Consequently, the state's prohibition on public discourse about homosexuality further solidified heteronormative authority, contributing to an atmosphere of censorship and silence surrounding non-heterosexual identities. After the CCP came to power in 1949, the opposition to homosexuality evolved into outright homophobia, leading to periods of active persecution under Mao’s rule, when it was government policy to deny that homosexuality existed, highlighting the extent of social and state-sanctioned discrimination (Endsjø 2011, 124-125).

Until the end of the Maoist sociopolitical movement known as the Cultural Revolution (文化大革命) in the late 1970s (Bai and Wu 2023, 981), public discussion of homosexuality was almost entirely absent. There were no established same-sex venues, and most individuals suppressed their same-sex desires or sought release in public toilets, parks, or railway stations (Fang 1995, 18). This environment of censorship and invisibility hindered queer subjects from openly expressing their identities or seeking support and acceptance from society, leading to decades of marginalization. Although during the early phase of the post-Mao reform era in the early 1980s the state's recognition of homosexuality did increase, oral testimonies suggest that this period was still particularly unfavourable for homosexual men, as it reinforced existing homophobic tendencies (Worth et al. 2018, 40). This became evident in *the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders* (CCMD, 中国精神疾病分类方案与诊断标准) issued in 1978, which classified homosexuality as a sexual disorder, and in the Criminal Law of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) promulgated in 1979, which introduced the “crime of hooliganism” (流氓罪) as an umbrella notion that encompassed homosexuality among other concepts and, as a result, enabled authorities to punish anal sex among men (Kong 2023, 8). Consequently, from the official state perspective of the 1980s through the mid-1990s, homosexuals were primarily viewed as falling somewhere between mental patients and hooligans (Kong 46).

Whilst sexual culture remained profoundly conservative in the 1980s, the acceleration of market reforms in the 1990s coincided with a more moderate pressure in state surveillance of private life. This facilitated the expansion of social and consumer spaces conducive to sexual

³ As in 新中国, which refers to the People's Republic of China, established on October 1, 1949 after the success of the Chinese Communist Revolution.

and romantic interactions (Farrer 2002, 12-13) that fostered the gradual emergence of contemporary queer identities and communities.

Although the state maintained a medical perspective of homosexuality, the official depathologization of homosexuality in 2001 marked a transition from a pathological to a national public health framework (Wong 2016, 77). This transition was further triggered by concerns regarding the AIDS crisis, which eventually led to the formal acknowledgment of the existence of homosexuals by the Chinese government in 2003 (He and Detels 2005, 826). These legal, medical, and public health advancements lessened the previous pathological and deviant connotations of homosexuality in both the social and governmental frameworks.

1.2 Liberation, Setbacks and Censorship

Since the 2000s, there has been a noticeable shift in social attitudes towards queer individuals in China, characterized by the gradual emergence of queer identities, cultures, and various LGBTQ+ consumer markets and communities, especially in major urban centres (Bao 2020, 10). The depathologization and decriminalization of homosexuality have indeed played crucial roles in shaping a uniquely Chinese queer subjectivity and empowering LGBTQ+ individuals to assert their identities and experiences within Chinese society (Huang 2018, 344).

This liberation from the mental disorder stigma and fear of persecution has fostered a greater sense of personal freedom and security within the gay community, contributing to increased acceptance and understanding of LGBTQ+ individuals within society at large (Kang 2012, 231).

The increasing representation and visibility of non-heteronormative sexual orientations and gender identities across various aspects of Chinese society have become evident in media portrayal, educational institutions, and public discourse (Zhao 2022, 1-2). Notably, younger generations in China are progressively coming to terms with homosexuality, viewing it not as an illness or deviance, but rather as a representation of individuality, difference, sophistication, liberation, and modernity (Kong 2023, 52-53). This generational transformation has contributed to greater openness and acceptance towards homosexual identities which, together with the persistent efforts of LGBTQ+ activists and advocacy groups, has facilitated recognition of diverse sexual identities within mainstream social narratives (Bao 2018, 105).

However, despite the tentative strides forward connected to the acceptance of sexual diversity witnessed in the early years of the 21st century, the queer community in China has been facing significant setbacks, largely attributable to the conservative agenda spearheaded by President Xi Jinping (The Economist 2022). While there was once hope and optimism for the future of the queer community in China, confirmed by the thriving gay clubs in major cities and the emergence of community groups providing support amidst social prejudice and state pressure, Xi Jinping's rise to the position of general secretary of the CCP in 2012 can be

considered as the catalyst for the regression of LGBTQ+ rights in China. Under his leadership, strict policies and control measures were enforced to shape an increasingly conservative and conformist China, which, as a result, further marginalized the queer community (Westcott and Jiang 2021).

Within the political landscape of China, censorship plays a critical role in shaping the visibility and representation of queer identities. The Chinese government maintains stringent control over media, significantly influencing how queer issues are portrayed and discussed (Bao 2021, 34). This control extends across various forms of media, including television, film, literature, and online content.

In an effort to remove content considered to be vulgar, immoral, and unhealthy from media platforms, the Chinese government made a significant move in its cultural crackdown by categorizing homosexuality as a censored topic for television (Mountford 2010, 9). Consequently, new regulations were introduced in 2015 by the CCP, banning any depiction of sexual behaviour deemed “unnatural” from television broadcasts. This included extramarital affairs, one-night stands, underage relationships, sexual assault and abuse, and of course, homosexuality (Ellis-Petersen 2016). These regulations not only effectively erased LGBTQ+ individuals and their experiences from mainstream television, but also perpetuated harmful stereotypes and discrimination against the queer community by grouping consensual homosexual relationships and sexual violence within the same category.

LGBTQ+ artists and advocacy groups often find themselves navigating in a restrictive environment that forces them to resort to underground channels to express themselves and raise awareness about their rights and experiences (Bao 2019b, 29; Engebretsen 2015, 125). This restricted LGBTQ+ environment in China indicates that censorship is a form of governance, aimed not only at suppressing criticism of the state but also at reducing the likelihood of collective action by silencing comments that represent, reinforce, or spur social mobilization, regardless of content (King, Pan and Roberts 2013, 328).

In 2021, the abrupt closure of accounts on the Chinese online messaging platform WeChat, which were linked to LGBTQ+ groups run by Chinese universities or non-profit organizations, highlighted the constraints on online expression and the ongoing systematic suppression of queer voices by the government. (Ni and Davidson 2021). This trend was further exemplified later in the same year, when the group LGBT Rights Advocacy China was forced to shut down all of its social media accounts (Lau 2024). As part of the preparations for the 2022 Winter Olympics, the Chinese government started a month-long campaign to regulate online content aimed at fostering the CCP’s aspiration of a “civilized” and “healthy” atmosphere, which coincided with the removal of the gay dating app Grindr from online app stores (France-Press 2022).

Since 2012, there has been a noticeable surge in systematic, official, and organized efforts aimed at disrupting the lives of *tongzhi* individuals in China, with the objective of establishing

a particular type of Chinese identity (Falci 2023, 108). This has led to a trend of increased suppression targeting LGBTQ+ advocacy groups and activists, resulting in arrests, violence and the forced shutdown of multiple organizations. By repeatedly shutting down queer-friendly online platforms and archives, the Chinese government is indeed responsible for silencing marginalized voices and obliterating the struggle for visibility and awareness (Song 2021, 308). Notably, the Beijing LGBT Center, which had operated under increasing pressure and censorship for over 15 years, announced its closure on May 15, 2023, attributing it to “forces beyond their control,” hence implying government intervention (Liang 2023). The centre served as a vital advocacy platform and safe space for queer individuals, hosting panel discussions on LGBTQ+ rights, workshops on gender identity and sexual orientation, film screenings featuring queer themes, and art exhibitions showcasing queer artists' work. This closure was yet another major setback for the Chinese LGBTQ+ community, as it removed a crucial institution that stood against prejudice towards sexual and gender minorities. Prior to this, Shanghai Pride indefinitely ceased its activities after 11 years of operation, while in 2021, LGBT Rights Advocacy China, known for its strategic lawsuits to advance LGBTQ+ rights, was forced to shut down as a condition for the release of its founder from police detention (Jiang 2020). These recent developments emphasise the shrinking space for gay identities in China and the ongoing challenges faced by the community in asserting their rights and visibility, marking a new era of repressive policies against queer individuals in China (Falci 2023, 108). Xi Jinping's perspective on Chinese society is strongly driven by his concern over the decline of traditional values, allegedly caused by the ever-growing influence of the West (Si 2024). As part of his call for his nationalist revival project, the “National Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation” (中华民族伟大复兴), Xi has advocated for a specific type of masculinity that aligns with his vision of the ideal Chinese citizen (Meacci 2022). In pursuit of this goal, the Beijing Municipal Radio and Television Bureau (北京市广播电视局) released an article in 2021, stating that the “sissy”⁴ aesthetic would not be allowed in the selection of actors, performance styles, costumes, and makeup (Jiang 2021). The following year, in 2022, another article emphasized the “need to follow Xi Jinping's directives on cultural and artistic work, promote positive values and reject unhealthy aesthetics and excessive makeup” (National Radio and Television Administration 2022). This translated in an enforced ban on portrayals of what the CCP perceives as effeminate men on television (CBS 2021).

By associating these effeminate traits, and thereby homosexuality, with Western influence, Xi Jinping reinforces his anti-Western narrative and justifies targeting LGBTQ+ individuals and organizations in the name of the nation's well-being (Xue 2021). The government's assertion that homosexuality is solely a product of Western capitalism echoes the rhetoric employed by Mao during the Cultural Revolution to vilify perceived Western influences. However, this narrative overlooks China's rich history of homosexual tendencies

⁴ As in 娘炮, a slur that refers to stylistic expressions associated with effeminacy

that date back to its dynastic periods, which, as demonstrated in other research (Hsinch 1990; Evans 1995; Kang 2009) proves that homosexuality in China is neither a modern invention nor solely a product of Western influences.

This historical context plays an essential role in understanding the complexity of LGBTQ+ issues within the country and in confronting oversimplified narratives perpetuated by the government.

1.3 Acceptance in the context of Society, Culture and Family

Xi Jinping's leadership has not only led to the limitation of safe spaces for the LGBTQ+ community and reduced its representation in the official mainstream media, but it has also significantly influenced people's perception of homosexuality in China, as evidenced by recent sociological studies. In *Contained Emancipative Social Values: Waves of Conservative and Liberal Trends in China* (Kennedy 2024, 114-115), John James Kennedy illustrates how the gradual trend towards greater acceptance of homosexuality in China came to a halt and was rescinded under Xi's administration. In 1990, when the first World Values Survey (WVS) was conducted in China, 90 percent of the respondents viewed homosexuality as "never acceptable".

However, by 2013, this figure had decreased to 48 percent, indicating a significant increase in social tolerance. This positive trend abruptly reversed by 2018, with the percentage of respondents holding this view rising to 67 percent (Kennedy 122). This shift coincided with the implementation of more conservative and traditionalist policies and propaganda of the CCP.

Despite previous studies (Xie and Peng 2017, 11-12) suggesting that economic development could lead to increased tolerance towards sexual minority groups, China's recent modernization efforts alone are insufficient to foster such tolerance due to the constant impact of the Chinese cultural context. In line with the historical importance placed on traditional Confucian beliefs, Chinese culture places a strong emphasis on adhering to the principle of the Doctrine of the Mean (中庸), which highlights the expectation for individuals to embody average and ordinary characteristics (Legge 1861, 257-260) thus further reinforcing social norms regarding heteronormativity and gender performance.

In addition, Confucianism also emphasizes the importance of social harmony, filial piety and respect for one's elders, resulting in individuals often experiencing considerable influence from their family and society (Hua, Yang and Fredriksen Goldsen 2019, 434-444). For those identifying as LGBTQ+, their sexual orientation or gender identity is often viewed as a source of shame, leading to the tarnishing of the family's reputation and causing them to "lose face" (丢面子) (Wang et al. 2020, 2). Being gay also challenges the Confucian core value of filial duty, seen as neglecting family obligations by not marrying and bearing offspring (Hu and Wang 2013, 671-672). The pressure to conform to these traditional expectations, which is particularly intense for the parents in the one-child-only cohort, can lead people to be rejected and excluded, potentially prompting suicide attempts. As a matter of fact, the *Survey of*

Homosexual Suicidal Tendencies (同性恋者自杀倾向调查问卷), which, by terminus ante quem, was circulated prior to 2021, found parental disapproval as one of the four primary triggers for suicidal ideation amongst gay men in China. Additionally, findings from the *Survey on Public Attitudes and Behaviours towards Homosexuals* (公众态度及行为对同性恋群体反应调查问卷), also dating prior to 2021, revealed that out of 99 parents surveyed, 59.6% expressed their unwillingness to support or accept their child if they were to come out to them (Yan 2021, 62). As a result, there has been a noticeable increase in the prevalence of nominal marriages amongst homosexual individuals in China, which further emphasises the enduring significance of family and marital customs and the importance placed on adhering to them (Choi and Luo 2016, 271). Similarly, a 2015 national survey on social attitudes towards sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression found that only 15% of respondents disclosed their identities within their families (United Nations Development Programme 2016, 26). Familial discrimination is common and includes admonishments to watch their appearance and behavior; forced changes in dressing, speaking, or acting; and general verbal abuse and judgment. These admonishments, verbal attacks, and in severe cases, physical violence, form the core of familial discrimination and explain why such a small number of LGBTQ+ individuals actually come out to their families (United Nations Development Programme, 28).

From ancient records of tolerance to modern-day struggles for acceptance, the queer experience in China reflects a dynamic trajectory marked by periods of liberation, setbacks, and censorship.

Despite its large LGBTQ+ population, China's social norms, cultural expectations, and government policies often obscure queer visibility and inclusion in society. This highlights the need to promote and understand grassroots movements, unofficial platforms, and marginalized voices like Mu Cao's, whose experiences are emblematic of the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community in China. A thorough exploration of the Chinese homosexual framework and its evolution over time was thus essential before delving into an analysis of Mu Cao's cultural production, writing style, and literary themes as it provides vital context for understanding the social and cultural forces that shape his work.

Chapter Two

Mu Cao's Intersectional Persona: China's First Openly Gay Poet and *Dagongren*

A Disfigured Woman

Upon glimpsing her face, people would subtly nudge others to notice it as well. They would wonder what had led to such a transformation in the woman's appearance and whether there could ever be a man that desired someone like her.

If a passing woman caught sight of that disfigured face, she would shield her own face with her palm in shock, silently praying for her features to remain unscathed from such horror.

Even if her face was not extremely beautiful, encountering such an horrendous one would make her feel so grateful for her own appearance!

Deep down, the woman knew that her face wasn't simply unattractive; it was unsettlingly frightening. She couldn't recall just how many children had burst into inconsolable tears at the sight of her face, with some even being too scared to utter a cry.

(Mu Cao, translated by Emma Mazzei)

As the first openly homosexual poet in China and a precarious worker, Mu Cao embodies a specific intersectionality that significantly affects both his identity and impact.

This chapter will delve into the nuanced layers of Mu Cao's persona, specifically examining the juxtaposition between his queerness and lower-class background, and how these intersecting experiences are manifested in his work.

In order to provide a thorough analysis, this chapter will begin with a biographical overview of Mu Cao's life (based on Van Crevel and Bao's forthcoming publication among other sources); his background, education and the experiences that have contributed to shaping his current perspective. Mu Cao's biography will provide a valuable context for an in-depth exploration of how the author's dual identity at the intersection of both *dagong* and queer communities influences his literary production.

3.1 A Farmer with a Poet's Dream

Mu Cao's life unfolds as an array of struggles, artistic exploration, and personal changes, marked by critical moments and significant milestones.

Born as Su Xianghui in Xihua County, Henan Province, in 1974, Mu Cao grew up amidst the harsh realities of rural poverty. He was born into a family of farmers as the middle child between two sisters, in the village of Qiangao. (Van Crevel and Bao, forthcoming). These



(Mu Cao, circa 1980)

formative years led to a deep understanding of the hardships associated with poverty and dysfunctional family dynamics, thus shaping his perspective and creative sensibilities.

Mu Cao's interest in poetry started when he was only fourteen years old and inspired by a junior high school composition assignment. His initial understanding of poetry solely revolved around rhyming, resulting in compositions that resembled jingles. In spite of this rather simplistic approach, his teacher recognised Mu Cao's underlying potential and encouraged him to write more poems (Bellemont 2018).

However, Mu Cao's educational path took a dramatic turn at the age of 15. Immersed in an educational environment that he described as oppressive and ideologically driven, Mu Cao experienced a serious conflict with one of his teachers, which ultimately led to his expulsion from school (Van Crevel and Bao, forthcoming). It was this key event that pushed him toward a journey of self-discovery and artistic exploration outside the realms of the traditional educational system. As a teenager he often borrowed books and bought second-hand or pirated editions of literary works and, as time went by, he also learnt how to use the internet, typeset and paint.

Following his expulsion from high school, he first helped his mother to run a tailoring stall and later embarked into the *dagong* experience by trying his hand at various jobs outside his hometown, which eventually led him to moving to Henan's capital, Zhengzhou (Chen 2023). Before his 20th birthday, Mu Cao had already been a restaurant busboy, a fresh produce porter, a noodle chef, a street vendor, a barber, and a warehouse clerk. During periods of unemployment, he would resort to sleeping in any public place that he could find, such as the square in front of the Zhengzhou Railway Station, the ticket office and even underground tunnels. It was during this time that he began writing verses, which eventually evolved into writing literature that mainly focused on poetry (Chen 2023).

The time spent in Zhengzhou also marked a milestone in Mu Cao's life when he discovered his sexuality and became absorbed in the Zhengzhou gay scene (Van Crevel and Bao, forthcoming). This period of self-discovery and exploration into his queer identity coincided with his literary aspirations, shaping his dual identity as an openly homosexual poet and a precarious worker.

In the spring of 1999, Mu Cao rented a small room in Zhengzhou where he continued to read and write whilst occasionally working as a street vendor to make ends meet. His landlady, Sister Zhang, a disfigured middle-aged woman who later became the protagonist of the novel *A Disfigured Woman* (一个被毁容的女人), provided him with financial support. It

was only through her assistance that he was able to print his first collection of poems titled *Poems by Mu Cao* (墓草的诗) (Chen 2023).

Mu Cao's artistic journey continued to evolve as he refined his abilities in graphic design, book layout, and website creation through independent learning and educational programs at a mature-learners school in the city. According to Maghiel Van Crevel and Hongwei Bao, it was precisely Mu Cao's expertise in these domains that played a crucial role in amplifying his voice and disseminating his literary works to a broader audience (Van Crevel and Bao, forthcoming).

In 2002, at the age of 28, Mu Cao made the significant decision to move to Beijing where, for the next sixteen years, he would engage with the capital's vibrant social scene, its queerness and the rich poetry setting.

From late 2013 to 2014, Mu Cao lived in the 523 Art Museum in Hai'an County, located in the Jiangsu Province, where he explored oil painting while continuing his writing venture. During this period, a Danish lady named Christie helped him financially for a year (Bellemont 2018).



(Mu Cao's oil painting, 2013)

In 2018, Mu Cao secured a job at a Beijing plant under the ownership of Foxconn Technology Group, the same company that operated the Shenzhen factory complex where Xu Lizhi (许立志), a fellow *dagong* poet, had worked before tragically ending his life due to the

harsh labour conditions⁵. Mu Cao left the job after three months at Foxconn, working 12 hour shifts daily, before deciding to return to Zhengzhou, where he continued to balance work and writing. (Chen 2023).

During the Spring Festival of 2020, Mu Cao returned to his village to celebrate the New Year with his mother, where he was stranded for three months due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic. The pandemic was not easy for Mu Cao, who is still not willing to the hardships he faced in that period (personal communication, 2024). Nevertheless, his literary pursuits culminated in the publication of *20: Twenty Years of Mu Cao's Poetry* (墓草二十年诗选), a selection of his work from 2000 to 2021, by the unofficial magazine GS Gay Spot in 2022. The following year, with the financial assistance of Maghiel Van Crevel and Hongwei Bao, a selection of his poems and short stories was published in Taiwan as *On the Underside* (孤獨的邊緣) and *The Edge of Loneliness* (孤獨的邊緣). (Van Crevel and Bao, forthcoming).

As of June 2024, Mu Cao is working at a conference center in Kaifeng, Henan. Work occupies all his time, leaving him with no energy to write. He is starting to feel sad and hopeless knowing that his literary contributions are not yet officially published in Mainland China (personal communication, 2024). Despite this, his work has won numerous awards over the years and has been translated into Slovenian, Dutch, and English. His achievements highlight the international recognition of his talent, even as he struggles with the lack of acknowledgment in his home country.

2.2 Mu Cao's Intersectional Persona

To understand Mu Cao's position at the juxtaposition of his *dagong* and queer characteristics, it is essential to consider the depth and intricacy of his works. It involves analysing how his lower-class background influences the queerness in his identity, as well as the themes, perspectives, and nuances in his writings.

As a *dagongren*, Mu Cao's identity is tied to the historical and socio-economic heritage of the traditional Chinese worker. Initially regarded as national heroes during the Maoist era, workers (工人) were idealized figures combating Western influences such as capitalism and non-normative sexual inclinations. They occupied a prominent place in a socialist rhetoric that emphasized collective labour, class struggle, and loyalty to the CCP (Li 2016, 390-391). The worker class served as a symbol of the progressive Socialist state (Schultz and Kai 2018, 21). Even as labour dynamics evolved into new connections that modified the society's perception of workers – especially in relation to the increased mobility of the rural population brought along by Deng Xiaoping's economic modernizations (Chan 1995, 62) - China remained a patriarchal society deeply imbued with heteronormativity.

⁵ Foxconn gained notoriety for the publicized series of 18 attempted suicides among its workers in 2010, which resulted in 14 deaths. As a response, the company installed safety nets to prevent workers from jumping from their dormitories.

The notion of *dagongren* reflects the precarious nature and vulnerability of semi-skilled labourers who face great difficulties such as low wages, long working hours, lack of job security and no access to social welfare (Shi 2008, 9). Rural migrant workers in urban areas often face stereotyping and subordination, epitomized by the low *suzhi*⁶ label imposed by employers and state agencies.

These migrant workers challenge dominant narratives, critique oppressive structures, and mobilize for social change through cultural production among other things (Sun 2014, 39). By engaging in cultural production, *dagongren* seek to affirm their human dignity and identity, highlighting the ongoing challenges they face within the contemporary neoliberal discourse.

This cultural struggle for recognition intertwines with the broader quest for economic and political equality, as it reflects the understanding that cultural denigration reinforces structural oppressions (Young 1997, 157).

To deal with their disadvantaged position in Chinese society and the misrepresentation within mainstream narratives, *dagongren* incentivized the emergence of the battler literature (打工文学) category.

Amidst this grassroots cultural movement, battler poetry (打工诗歌) is by far the most prominent genre (Van Crevel 2017a, 246). Battler poetry originated in the mid-1980s, when workers employed in the industrialized regions of South China began sharing their poems in factory journals, informal handouts and regional literary magazines (Iovene and Picerni 2022, 12). By the end of the decade, individual poets were submitting their pieces for official release, thus increasing the visibility of battler poetry in mainstream literary circles (Van Crevel 2017a, 258).

However, despite the fact that he had contributed to the genre since the early 21st century, Mu Cao remained notably absent from nearly all collections of battler poetry and other public acknowledgments in this field, possibly due to his sexuality (Van Crevel and Bao, forthcoming). His literary debut in the unofficial poetry journal *Scrutiny* (审视) notably includes homoerotic content, thus marking his public coming out, as well as offering poignant reflections on lower-class living conditions. The explicit homosexual content in Mu Cao's cultural production contrasts with rural migrant workers' gendered expectations and the desire for the continuation of traditional family and community structures (Thomson 2017, 308), thus further forcing him into a niche position of the mainstream *dagong*'s cultural production.

It is important to note that Mu Cao not only diverges from mainstream *dagongren* norms, but he also falls short of meeting contemporary queer expectations. His reluctance to conform to mainstream standards of LGBTQ+ identities further complicates his reception within both the queer community and wider cultural circles. Most contemporary LGBTQ+ realities are encouraging consumption as evidence of gay identity (Valocchi 2019, 160) and China is not different in this case, as Beijing's queer social movements have been criticised for

⁶ As in 素质, human quality level. It refers to the inherent qualities of a person, such as level of education and skills.

being urban, middle-class and consumption-oriented (Bao 2020, 127). The rapid pace of globalization and neoliberalism has triggered modern expressions of homosexuality in contemporary China since the 1990s (Kong 2011, 194). These developments have led to a rise in assimilationist politics, adopting a neoliberal structure similar to trends observed in the Western lesbian and gay movement in recent decades (Kong 2011, 34).

In addition to this, the emergence of the Internet facilitated the widespread availability of cultural products such as novels and online videos portraying the experiences of lesbians and gay men in China. These narratives mirror the increasing tendency of gay individuals to share their personal experiences through new media platforms. However, it's crucial to recognize that these stories do not represent the absolute truths about sexuality. Rather, they are socially constructed experiences shaped by the impact of globalization on sexual dynamics and political discourse in modern-day China (Luo, Tseng and Ma 2022, 1257).

Amidst this social context, Mu Cao is not afraid to openly address topics considered taboo or outdated by the gentrified LGBTQ+ community. Themes like sexually transmitted diseases, public cruising, and sexual abuse, which are unspeakable traumas the middle-class members of Beijing's queer community are trying to dissociate themselves from, are instead explicitly expressed by Mu Cao (Bao 2020, 128-129). On top of that, considering how neither 'poetry' nor 'working class' are appealing concepts to the popular taste (Bao 2020, 127), it is understandable why Mu Cao's contributions may be easily dismissed by urban queer audiences.

Nevertheless, despite being marginalized within both the heteronormative *dagong* narrative and the homonormative queer discourse in contemporary China, Mu Cao demonstrated remarkable resilience by effectively leveraging the unofficial poetry scene to his advantage. In this paradigm, the emergence of unofficial publications has met the demand for avant-garde poetics (Van Crevel 2017a, 259), serving as a platform to explore taboo themes often overlooked in the mainstream discourse. These unofficial (民間) poetry journals, which have persisted since the late 1970s, provide a much-needed alternative to official (官方) publication, in terms of aesthetics, ideological orientation, and the social dynamics of literature and art (Van Crevel 2017a, 251), thus enabling the exploration of new voices and texts that challenge social and political expectations. They have become vital platforms for artists with different perspectives to share their stories, connect with like-minded individuals, and advocate for change away from the prying eyes of government censorship. Despite the rise of the internet in China, these printed journals continue to thrive (Van Crevel 2017b), serving as a testing ground for boundary-pushing poetry and offering a platform for marginalized voices, including queer and dissenting writers like Mu Cao.

Mu Cao's distinct perspective extends beyond his literary endeavours; he notably rejects the confinement of labels and categories. In a realm where social norms often dictate identities and affiliations, Mu Cao stands out for his explicit reluctance to be defined by rigid classifications, including that of a gay poet (Van Crevel 2017b). In interviews, he often

expresses his detachment from genres and labels, emphasizing that queer poetry is just one facet of his extremely diverse body of work. He dismisses the notion of being pigeonholed as a queer poet, a *dagong* one, or any other predefined category for that matter (Bellemont 2018). In fact, he detests labels as much as he likes to play fast and loose with them, producing work that belongs to both the battler poetry and queer literary discourse and, at the same time, tallies with neither of them. Mu Cao's queerness adds layers of complexity and depth to his exploration of the struggles of the labouring class, while his *dagong* background infuses his portrayal of queerness with a sense of authenticity and lived experience.

Mu Cao views his writing as a product of environmental influences and personal experiences, emphasizing that his whole oeuvre cannot be considered autobiographical, as it also draws from diverse sources and imaginative interpretations of reality (personal communication, 2024).

Chapter Three

Homosexual Experience in Mu Cao's Writing

This chapter analyses the homosexual experience in Mu Cao's literary works, which serve not only as a reflection of personal identity, but also as a poignant commentary on the socio-political milieu of contemporary China.

Through Mu Cao's writings, which eloquently capture the emotional depth of individuals grappling with their sexual identity within the context of Chinese contemporary society, this chapter sheds light on the many challenges faced by individuals within these intersections. This exploration delves into the intersection of homosexuality with feelings of loneliness, the experience of being homosexual across different socioeconomic strata, and the intricate relationship between homosexuality and politics.

3.1 Homosexuality and Politics

The Thief Ah Xing

*The unemployed Ah Xing
While he was stealing a bicycle near a park
He was caught and taken away by a police officer
His heart was pounding as he sat in the police car
Ah Xing thought this would be the end of him*

*Instead, the policeman brought the thief home
Offered him drinks, food, and a bath
Then he benevolently educated the handsome Ah Xing
Even promised to help him find a job*

*The policeman brought out a condom
Helped the young thief put it on with his mouth
And put grease⁷ on his own anus
Sat on Ah Xing's lap like Guanyin sat on the lotus⁸
Ah Xing's eyes were brimming with tears of gratitude*

*At that moment the four walls trembled slightly
A mirror fell to the ground
A cry of excitement -
If all the police officers and thieves
Were like this!!!!!!
Wouldn't the world be at peace!*

⁷ As in 油脂雪花膏, a type of grease often used as a lubricant during sex.

⁸ In Buddhism, the figure of Guanyin (观音) represents the goddess of mercy. Considered to be the physical embodiment of compassion, Guanyin is often represented as sitting on a lotus flower, which is a symbol of the purity of Buddha's mind.

(Mu Cao, translated by Emma Mazzei)

“The thief Ah Xing” is a story of absurdity and dark humour that explores the complex intersection between homosexuality and politics. This intersection is marked by power imbalances, social stigma, and the subtle ways in which homosexual relationships might manifest within oppressive settings. The policeman's behaviour can be seen as representative of repressed desires within a rigid authoritarian structure, exposing a private life that contradicts his public role, emphasising the conflict between personal identity and heteronormative expectations of Chinese society.

What distinguishes the poetic form of this piece is its fractured structure, which captures key moments and emotions without the need for an extensive narrative arc. This fragmentation allows the reader to focus on the intensity of each moment. Moreover, the poem's rhythmic and repetitive elements, such as the retelling of the policeman's actions, which culminates in Ah Xing's pleasure, create a musical quality that enhances the emotional resonance and adds to the darkly humorous tone.

By depicting an improbable scenario where a police officer treats a thief with unexpected kindness and sexual advances, the poem presents a direct critique of the hidden dynamics of power and desire. Black humour is evident in the poem that, together with satire, targets social norms and the institutions that enforce them, particularly focusing on the police and the dynamics between authority and marginalized groups, such as thieves and homosexuals. The idea of a police officer taking a thief home and engaging in sexual activity rather than processing him through the legal system is morbidly humorous. I reckon that it is precisely the use of satire and black humour that emphasises the absurdity of the circumstances at play and highlights the potential for corruption and exploitation within the authority figures that should instead be in charge of upholding the law. Rather than enforcing the law, the officer behaves with almost surreal benevolence - offering food, drinks, and a bath to the thief - before indulging in personal pleasure, which exposes the absurdity and potential darkness in power dynamics.

The act of the policeman putting a condom on the thief and applying lube himself is grotesquely humorous as it transforms a situation of power imbalance into a consensual and almost ritualistic act, mocking the serious nature of sexual exploitation and coercion. By presenting the police officer as someone who uses his power for personal and sexual gratification, the poem satirizes the notion of authority figures being morally superior; it suggests that those in power are just as capable of vice and hypocrisy. The gnarly humour is also evident in Ah Xing's tears of gratitude. At this point I strongly believe that, whilst in a normal context gratitude would stem from the genuine help he had received, in this case, gratitude emerges from a bizarre and inappropriate use of power. This highlights the irony of the nature of authority and the expression of gratitude under coercion.

One might wonder what Ah Xing is actually grateful for: is it the relief of not being arrested, the prospect of a fresh start, or is it purely connected to the sexual encounter? By considering these questions, the poem further emphasizes the absurdity and complexity of the situation, questioning the sincerity and motivation behind gratitude when it is entangled with coercion and power dynamics.

The poem ends with one last ironic statement that acts as a critique to law enforcement and social order: "If all the police officers and thieves / Were like this!!!! / Wouldn't the world be at peace!". This satirical utopian vision mocks the idea of simplistic solutions to complex social problems and implies that peace could only come from absurd and morally questionable relationships. Mu Cao's intention behind this poem is to depict a scenario where alleged deviant behaviour leads to unexpected benevolence and intimacy. By doing so, I believe he is suggesting that breaking these norms can create moments of connection and understanding, albeit he does so by presenting such circumstances in an exaggerated and ironic manner.

3.2 Homosexuality and Loneliness

Inspiration

*The rain outside hasn't stopped,
like a heartbroken man
weeping non-stop.
No, like a great gay poet weeping.*

*I lie in bed alone
not thinking of women
not thinking of men
not thinking of suicide...
I want to write a poem that makes me soar
a poem that moves concrete, steel, and stone.*

*The rain outside hasn't stopped
my inspiration is damp and mouldy.*

*Mushrooms grow from hell
wood ear mushroom⁹ grow from heaven.*

(Mu Cao, translated by Emma Mazzei)

“Inspiration”, rich in symbolism and emotional depth, explores the intersection between homosexuality and loneliness, using natural images and metaphors to express the emotional and complex landscape of a solitary gay poet, possibly drawing from Mu Cao's own

⁹ As in 木耳, a type of fungi whose shape is similar to a crinkled ear.

autobiographical experiences. The poem's brevity is necessary to express its intensity, spotlighting the essence of the poet's emotions in just a few stanzas, preserving a depth that could otherwise be diluted in a longer narrative form.

“Inspiration” begins with the image of never-ending rain, like “a heartbroken man weeping non-stop” and “a great gay poet weeping”. This comparison immediately sets a tone of constant sadness and emphasises the emotional burden felt by the author. Its continual repetition mirrors the poet's internal state, suggesting the persistent nature of his melancholy.

The sequence of negations in the second stanza of the poem expresses the poet's solitude: the complete absence of thoughts regarding both women and men suggests a complete disconnection from potential relationships, emphasizing the alienation often felt by individuals in the LGBTQ+ community, especially in more antagonistic environments. The explicit mention of suicide, while initially unsettling, reveals a new and pivotal aspect of the poet's mental state: he is bravely facing his loneliness rather than succumbing to despair, indicating a sense of resilience to his anguish.

The author's desire to write a poem that makes him soar and is capable of moving concrete, steel, and stone reflects his aspiration to overcome his loneliness through creative expression and his desire to be recognised in a world that marginalises him. Writing serves as an escape route in this context. However, his creative inspiration is dampened by the continuous rain of loneliness. The author later compares his sources of creativity to mushrooms in the concluding lines of the poem: those growing from hell symbolize ideas stemming from suffering and pain, while the wood ear mushrooms from heaven suggest inspiration derived from more positive experiences. The juxtaposition of these images implies that the poet's creativity is nurtured by both his agony and his aspirations, thus encompassing a full spectrum of human experiences.

3.3 Homosexuality Across Different Socio-Economic Strata

Man at Bath¹⁰

The withered willow tree sprouts yellow buds from its never-dead branches, there are no birds chirping; In the vegetable market, there are three-yuan¹¹ pots of March chrysanthemums in bloom, this is what spring is like in B City. M's day bag contained a thousand yuan, the very last paycheck he got before leaving the company for good.

“It is the fear of not having money that stimulates us to work hard, when we are being rewarded, greed and lust once again begin to make us desire all the things that money can buy”.

¹⁰ As in 浴男. The translation of the short story's title comes directly from the French drama “Homme au Bain” by François Sagat.

¹¹ As in 人民币, Chinese currency. 1 yuan corresponds approximately to 0,13€.

Poverty no longer motivates M to work hard. He is underappreciated, pessimistic, his heart prematurely aged. At work, M's mood is gray, he keeps a low profile, disappointed with all of the bosses and colleagues in the company. He is a different kind of loner, in his thirties, unmarried, living alone in a soon-to-be demolished small house in the suburbs, self-marketing a fragile life.

M has dreams, but his dreams are far away.

M gets on a shabby bus, either at the terminal or starting station. He sits by the window, looking at the sky above the rooftops outside the window, not a single bird in sight, not even a sparrow, the afterglow of the setting sun and the shining billboards complement each other.

He ignores the noises around him, getting used to the everyday's slow flow of people and vehicles. By the time the bus reaches the second stop, the bus is already crowded. M listens the ticket inspector's calls to check tickets approaching, then stretches a hand holding a monthly pass high up through the cracks of the crowd, struggling to pull back his arm after hearing a confirming "Hmm" or "Okay".

M returns to his residence, quickly forgetting all his colleagues at the company. At this moment, he only wants to buy a bottle of cheap liquor and a piece of either chicken or pork.

Walking into an alley outside the vegetable market, he sees an old man selling used books sitting on the ground stall, selling his time. He stops, his gaze falling to the floor like a sparrow, the ground littered with eight layers of new pirated books or worn-out original books. M sighs and walks away. He recalls that he doesn't have to get up early for work tomorrow, which eases the worry he constantly feels; he thinks of going to the gay sauna tonight, immediately feeling a comfort so similar to the arrival of spring.

M's bed is messy, piled with books, VCD discs (CDs), condoms, tissue paper, and clothes that had already been discarded days ago. M finds his phone on the bed, checks the time, then walks out the door to the bus stop to wait for the last bus.

M can't remember how many times he has been to this particular gay sauna. Each time, he goes in with hopes almost akin to love, only to leave each time with disappointment, fatigue, and hidden pain. M remembers that the last few times he had been to the sauna it had been on a Friday evening. He feels that the bed sheets are cleaner on Fridays than Saturdays. He avoids going on Sundays if he can help it; he knows that many just like him share the same fear of not being mentally prepared for work the following day after a wild night.

Every time M leaves the sauna, it's already noon of the next day. He would walk a short distance to a semi-sheltered eatery and orders two stuffed buns and a bowl of corn porridge; his first meal of the day. Thinking back to the passionate or crazy scenes from the previous night, there was really nothing that was actually worth remembering. M likes to walk to a two-yuan store near the Lu Xun Literary Institute—picking out several pirated horror films, which are mostly nothing more than a bunch of uninspired zombie and ghost movies made by third-rate directors. M has been watching gay porn movies for seven years. Now, watching these films doesn't evoke in him any sort of feeling; his eyes have seen far too many real encounters, always leading him to an initial reaction of numbness.

There are many gay bathhouses in B City, some of which appeared overnight — orchestrated by the owners in secret and promoted through online channels, quickly attracting spiritually wandering souls. After a period of time, which could range from just a few months to even a few years, these bathhouses were shut down one by one by the police.

[...]

M enjoys going to the sauna; he vividly recalls the first time he walked into one four years ago, instantly becoming addicted— he was seduced by raw carnal desires, succumbing to them until his existence was replaced by the pain in his rectum

[...]

M doesn't want to chat with others; he's tired of everyone repeatedly asking: "What do you do for work? Where are you from? How old are you this year?" Continuing with repetitive topics that fail to evoke any sense of novelty from the other person!

"It's not like we're getting married, why do you have to ask like you're checking my household registration?"

At the beginning, M was happy to answer to them, one by one. He hadn't been able to find a BF¹² so far, he knows that society is tolerant enough of people like him, did they not appreciate it enough? Are there simply too many options available? Their shadows can be seen everywhere in the city, engaging in one casual encounter after another...

[...]

M doesn't know why he's living like this, feeling unhappy, bored, lacking any sense of novelty. Every one of his actions seems to be against himself. He hates himself, feels inferior, lonely, helpless, fearful, and depressed. He is deeply submerged in his own darkness, in a constant state of struggle...

(Mu Cao, translated by Emma Mazzei)

In the story “Man at Bath”, Mu Cao explores the intersection of being a lower-class, precarious worker and homosexual through the lens of the protagonist, M. The narrative captures the emotional and socio-economic struggles faced by M, painting a vivid picture of his monotone daily life, emotions, carnal desires, the underlying sense of loneliness and isolation that permeates his existence. Through its detailed narrative and linear progression, the story unfolds its themes, with settings and events meticulously described, creating an immersive experience typical of the prose format.

M is a lower-class worker who is dissatisfied with his job. He is depicted as feeling unhappy, bored, and lacking any sense of novelty or purpose, a reality that is common to many lower-class, unskilled workers. His interactions with others at the sauna are marked by repetitive, shallow conversations that further emphasise his sense of isolation. M's self-hatred, feelings of inferiority, and depression reveal the depth of his internal struggle: he is trapped in a cycle of self-destructive behaviour, unable to break free from his own darkness.

The story begins with the protagonist receiving his final paycheck of a mere thousand yuan, symbolizing the end of his employment and the uncertainty of his future. His financial struggles are emphasized by his pessimism and psycho-physical aging. The fear of poverty no longer motivates him to work hard, suggesting a sense of resignation and hopelessness in his *dagong* condition.

Despite the fact that he lives in a society that is portrayed as being tolerant of homosexuality, M continues to feel lonely, unfulfilled and excluded from society. The fleeting nature of the gay bathhouses serves as a testament to the precariousness of safe spaces for homosexual individuals in China. M's sense of isolation is enhanced by his inability to form

¹² Common abbreviation for boyfriend.

lasting relationships, with casual encounters failing to provide emotional fulfilment. The visits to the sauna, which initially filled him with excitement and hope, eventually become routine and unsatisfying, mirroring M's overall sense of stagnation. However, his financial situation doesn't allow him any other sort of escapism from reality.

The narrative suggests that M's loneliness and dissatisfaction are a product of both his socio-economic status and his marginalized sexual orientation. M's homosexuality is portrayed as a hidden aspect of his life, almost expressed clandestinely. His visits to the sauna, rather than alleviating his loneliness, often reinforce it, as he leaves each time with a sense of disappointment and fatigue. This short story strongly serves as a subtle critique towards social indifference and marginalization of individuals like M.

Chapter Four

Stylistic Analysis of Mu Cao's Portrayal of Homosexuality

In this final chapter, I will delve into Mu Cao's artistic approach to portraying homosexuality, by focusing on his methods and stylistic choices. By examining specific excerpts and their thematic significance, I will illustrate how Mu Cao's artistic approach contributes to a more nuanced understanding of queer identities in China's rapidly changing society. Furthermore, this chapter will address the translation choices and difficulties encountered during the process and their inherent implications on the overall interpretation of Mu Cao's work.

3.1 Artistic Approach and Thematic Significance

Mu Cao's work is a testament of the lives of marginalized individuals, with a particular focus on queer experiences in contemporary China. His narrative techniques are powerful and evocative, offering readers a glimpse into the realities faced by his characters.

In “A Male Hooker’s Job Application”, several stylistic choices stand out, contributing to its powerful impact. To start with, Mu Cao employs unembellished language to depict the commodification of the male body within a capitalist society. The inquiries regarding sexual performance, narrated through colloquial dialogue, reveal the degrading aspects of the situation and provide a specific cultural and linguistic context.

Furthermore, the minimalistic approach used by the author draws attention to the protagonist's plight without unnecessary embellishment. The imagery is minimal yet powerful, highlighting the emptiness of the protagonist's emotions and making the reader empathize with his condition.

The poem's ending deepens the irony and tragedy of the protagonist's situation by playing on the word “impotence” within the context of explicit sexual content throughout the poem. When the protagonist experiences impotence for the first time, it is not physical sexual impotence but rather the impotence to change his socio-economic situation. This layered meaning highlights the protagonist's profound sense of powerlessness and despair, underscoring the broader themes of marginalization and social rejection.

“The Chimney” delves into the theme of isolation and the elusive quest for same-sex love in a society where such relationships are not legally recognized. The overall tone of the poem is melancholic and introspective, reflecting the speaker's sense of alienation and longing for acceptance and love.

Imagery and metaphors play a crucial role in “The Chimney”. First of all, the image of a “masked game” (面具游戏) with old men and the recurring sense of displacement illustrate the profound sense of alienation experienced by queer individuals. Moreover, objects like the

“reading glasses” (老花镜) and “mother's chimney” (母亲的烟囱) are also embedded with symbolic meaning. The reading glasses signify aging and the passage of time, further emphasized by references to time passing and people who have disappeared, creating a sense of loss and impermanence with phrases like “yesterday, the yesterday of yesterday” (昨天 · 昨天的昨天). On the other hand, the warmth and domesticity traditionally associated with the image of a chimney, contrasts sharply with the protagonist's solitary wandering, capturing his deep yearning for acceptance and belonging.

The cultural references in the poem, such as the “mother tongue” (母语) and “Chinese characters” (汉字), also enhance its thematic depth. They highlight the speaker's cultural identity and bond to his heritage, even if he feels alienated within it. Finally, the repetition of “Difficult! Difficult! Difficult!” (难! 难! 难!) also plays a crucial role in the poem, as it emphasizes the emotional intensity and frustration faced by the protagonist.

“The Thief Ah Xing” presents a unique twist on the theme of authority and subversion. The story of a young thief taken in by a police officer, who later exploits him sexually, blurs the lines between protector and predator. The policeman's actions reveal the insidious ways in which power can corrupt and exploit the vulnerable, adding another layer to Mu Cao's critique of social structures.

One of the most notable stylistic elements is the narrative structure: the poem unfolds like a short story, providing a clear sequence of events marked by temporal conjunctions such as “then” (然后) and “and even” (还) in the second verse. “The Thief Ah Xing” features a straightforward account of the protagonist's actions that gradually moves into a more surreal and emotional experience, blending irony and satire to comment on social norms and justice. Just as in the other poems above, Mu Cao yet again pays particular attention to imagery. The act of penetration between the policeman and Ah Xing is compared to the Buddhist deity Guanyin sitting on a lotus, a symbol of sacredness. This comparison is highly symbolic, combining religious iconography with the profanity of sex, highlighting the incongruity and complexity of the situation. The poem ends with a hyperbole, which emphasizes the poem's satirical edge and the surreality of the situation.

In “Inspiration”, Mu Cao uses vivid symbolism, repetition and contrast to evoke melancholic emotions in the reader. The continual rain becomes a co-protagonist in the poem: the repeated metaphor of the constant rain (窗外的雨一直没停), symbolizing the protagonist's sorrowful state, emphasizes his persisting melancholy. The rain is indeed metaphorically linked to emotional conditions, representing tears and the dampening of inspiration. This metaphor extends to the poet's creative process, highlighting his struggles.

Another notable repetition in the poem is the complete lack of desire for men, women, and suicide alike. This repetition (没有想) emphasises the poet's loneliness and the emotional and existential pain of the queer experience.

The poem contrasts different elements to deepen its thematic exploration: the transition from “hell” (地狱) to “heaven” (天堂) in the growth of mushrooms suggests a comparison between despair and hope, decay and renewal.

Finally, the tone shift in the poem is also significant. As Mu Cao moves from expressing sorrow to a desire for creative expression, he conveys the duality of suffering and hope inherent to the experiences that marginalized individuals live.

In the case of “Man at Bath”, the prose creates a powerful narrative that delves into the themes of isolation, identity, and societal critique, concurrently painting a vivid picture of M's life and struggles. The text captures the sense of routine and disillusionment that permeates M's life, reflecting broader themes of isolation and the search for significance. The sauna, initially a place of excitement and hope, becomes a symbol of unfulfilled desires and the persistent ache of loneliness. Mu Cao's detailed descriptions of M's surroundings and inner thoughts provide a deeply personal perspective of the queer subject's experience in urban China.

Even though the stylistic choices are more subtle in the prose compared to the poetry, the text is still embedded with clear imagery that creates a melancholic and reflective atmosphere. For instance, the contrast between the juxtaposition of the “withered willow tree sprouting tender yellow buds” (枯干的柳树从未死的枝条中钻出嫩黄的芽) and the “sunset glow blending with the shining billboards” (落日的余晖正和闪亮的广告牌相互渲染) highlights M's feelings of isolation and detachment from society.

Additionally, the use of stream of consciousness and internal monologue in the prose reveals the protagonist's disillusionment and introspection. This technique helps readers to intimately connect with M's character and to commiserate with his inner turmoil.

What is most evident in the prose is, however, the social critique: the existence and subsequent closure of bathhouses by the police symbolize the precariousness and stigma with regard to places allocated to homosexual subjects in the city. This aspect of the narrative reveals the social challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community, emphasizing the ongoing struggle for acceptance and safe spaces.

4.2 The Act of Translating

At the heart of the translation process lies an intrinsic task of cultural mediation. Translation is in fact an arduous attempt to achieve a deep understanding of both the original work and its cultural context. In order to effectively convey the original meaning and style, it is important to be familiar with both the target languages and cultures.

Translating is a process of discovery, comparison, and adaptation, involving a continuous exchange between languages and cultures. It is a dynamic practice, characterized by overcoming and reinterpreting the core differences between languages. The notion of translation as a simple substitution of words or linguistic transfer is misleading, especially in the case of Mu Cao's literary production.

Before starting a translation, it is important to fully understand and get the feeling of the text. To better interpret the true meaning of the author's style and lexicon, as suggested by Roland Barthes (Barthes and Balzac 1990, 15-16), I reread the text multiple times in order to immerse myself in the context. Familiarity with the author's literary output and narrative imagination is beneficial for grasping hidden meanings and avoiding misinterpretations. Direct consultation with the author, as proposed by Franca Cavagnoli (Cavagnoli 2019, 56) did help me to clarify my doubts and perplexities about Mu Cao's personal experiences and peculiarities.

Translating Mu Cao's work is thus not merely about a linguistic conversion but it also involves a profound engagement with the cultural and emotional layers embedded in his writing. Mu Cao's works are indeed rich in cultural references that may not be immediately familiar to non-expert readers. To address this aspect, I decided to use footnotes to provide cultural context for specific elements. This approach ensures that readers can fully grasp the cultural significance of these references without disrupting the narrative flow.

Translating Mu Cao's works presented a series of challenges, especially in view of his raw and unembellished style. One of my primary concerns was maintaining the emotional depth of the original text while ensuring the translated version resonated with an English-speaking audience. Preserving this rawness required a careful selection of vocabulary and sentence structures to reflect the unadorned nature of his writing. One of the greatest challenges was translating the explicit sexual content. Given the academic nature of this project, it was necessary to balance the explicitness in its content. This involved finding terms that were explicit enough to reflect the original frankness, but that were restrained enough to suit an academic context. When it came to translating his poetry, the challenge became even more difficult, as each of his works carries substantial weight. The goal was to maintain the same intensity and emotional resonance without losing the subtleties of the original vocabulary.

One particularly challenging aspect arose in translating the verb 想 in the poem "Imitation". Being a part of a repetition that underscores the poet's loneliness and existential pain, it was crucial to convey the same emotions effectively in English. Given 想's dual meaning of "to desire" and "to think", selecting either would have had a significant impact the poem's essence. After careful deliberation, I chose the interpretation of "wanting" and decided to use the verb "longing for", as I believed it better captured the protagonist's melancholic lack of desire, portraying a yearning that resonated with the poem's theme.

Through his distinct stylistic choices and unique writing style, Mu Cao effectively captures the complex emotional and social experiences of the homosexual experience in contemporary China. His work serves as a powerful commentary on the challenges faced by queer individuals, by offering insight into the complexities of their identities. Moreover, it stands as a testament to the resilience of a solitary gay poet who uses cultural expression as a means of navigating through loneliness, homophobia, and discrimination.

Conclusion

The primary aim of this thesis was to investigate how Mu Cao's writing portrays the homosexual experience in contemporary China. With this study, I attempted to emphasize Mu Cao's intersectional identity, considering both his lower-class background and his experiences as a queer individual. This research employed primary and secondary sources: the primary sources consist of poetry and short stories that Mu Cao published throughout his career, along with interviews and correspondence with the author. The secondary sources, on the other hand, include relevant scholarship needed to contextualize Mu Cao's work within the broader socio-cultural landscape of China, as well as existing research on the author himself, mostly authored by Maghiel Van Crevel and Hongwei Bao.

The ultimate goal of this thesis was to answer the following research question: *How does Mu Cao's writing portray the homosexual experience in contemporary China?* In order to do so, my first research objective was to provide an in-depth analysis of the socio-cultural context surrounding the queer experience in modern-day China. For this reason, I examined challenges, issues, and prevailing social attitudes that shape these circumstances. My second research objective was to analyse how Mu Cao's lower-class background influences and shapes his portrayal of queerness. I provided a detailed biographical overview of Mu Cao's life, his upbringing, and his position within both the *dagong* and queer communities. The online correspondence that I had with Mu Cao helped me gain firsthand insights into his perspectives and fully understand his nuanced and compound identity.

Once I established a clear overview of Mu Cao's background and social context, I proceeded to delve into the analysis of his works. I strongly believe that to fully appreciate Mu Cao's literary contributions, it was essential to first investigate the multilayered queer experience in Chinese society. Such an exploration did not only highlight the historical shifts, social attitudes, and governmental policies that led to the current—and mostly unsupportive—attitudes towards homosexuality in China, but also provided valuable context to better comprehend the intrinsic connections between Mu Cao's life experiences and his literary production.

Regarding the answer to my research question, through an in-depth analysis of Mu Cao's literary techniques and thematic content, I argue that his writing offers a profound portrayal of the different aspects of the homosexual experience in China. This portrayal is intertwined with themes of loneliness, political dissatisfaction, and the struggles of the Chinese homosexual subject, as well as the *dagong* one. Mu Cao's ability to create an emotional connection with the audience is a testament to his skill in conveying thoughts and feelings throughout the use of words. The homosexual experience is narrated through a flawless use of satire, parody, black humour, and metaphorical imagery.

It would be worthwhile to further investigate Mu Cao's works in order to gain a deeper understanding of the interplay between socio-economic background and queer identities. However, due to time and space constraints, I must adjourn the continuation of this topic for future research, an endeavour that I hope to carry on myself in the foreseeable future.

My decision to analyse Mu Cao's literary production stems from an initial study that I started back in 2022, though what really pushed this project was my desire to give voice to an author who is still relatively unknown both internationally and within China itself. This thesis is indeed an attempt and a starting point, albeit not without its flaws, to guide more readers towards the discovery of new faces in the Chinese literary landscape. Perhaps this work can be considered a preliminary study that allows the global audience to familiarize itself with the cultural production of an author whom I am confident will soon gain recognition and achieve the acknowledgment he truly deserves.

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