

Cold War Metaphors in The Membranes: Segregation, Protection, and Historical Inscription

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Abstract. Chi Ta-wei once likened queer literature to a "child of the Cold War." His novella *The Membranes* engages in profound reflection on the legacy left by the Cold War in Taiwanese society through imaginative depictions of the future and the body. During the Cold War, the Taiwan Strait separated the Chinese mainland from the islands. The core metaphor of the "membrane" operates not merely as a physical boundary between the two sides but also as a protective barrier. In times of external upheaval, individuals could retreat into the inner space enveloped by this "membrane," seeking refuge and stability. This "membrane" reflects the predicament of individuals striving for self-expression and self-consolation within the interstices of the martial law system during the Cold War, while also embodying a gap—both unwillingly and insurmountably—between the individual and the external reality. This paper examines how the "membrane" is shaped by Taiwan's geopolitical context, socio-cultural dynamics, and individual life experiences under the shadow of the Cold War, and how it translates the strategic reality of the island chain within the Cold War framework into existential and developmental dilemmas for individuals in society.

Keywords: *The Membranes*, Chi Ta-wei, The history of the Cold War, Science fiction queer, Literary form

1. Introduction

During the Cold War, Taiwan found itself in a peculiar geopolitical situation—abandoned by competing international systems while remaining an isolated island under martial law. It was deeply drawn into the quagmire of U.S.-Soviet bipolar confrontation, with its fate repeatedly pulled and pushed by the three major forces of the United States, the Soviet Union, and China, each holding a decisive hand. This resulted in a state of internal repression and external survival. The Cold War not only shaped political and economic structures but also left a deep imprint on Taiwan's literary landscape. The trajectory of Taiwan's literature unfolded amid the tug-of-war among U.S.-backed cultural institutions, state-led anti-communist ideology, and the pervasive atmosphere of the White Terror. Under the influence of American aid in the cultural sphere, many literary works appeared to be "depoliticized" on the surface, yet their content often served specific political ends. Meanwhile, the 38-year-long period of martial law and the White Terror cast a heavy shadow over Taiwanese literature, fostering a prolonged climate of collective silence and fear across society. Against this

backdrop, Western-born modernism underwent localization in Taiwan, becoming not only a spiritual outlet for writers but also a form of marginal resistance within the narrow spaces left available.

The history of the Cold War gave rise to many outstanding writers and literary works, and Chi Ta-wei is one of the representatives. He once stated that "gay literature is a child of the Cold War." This is not only because the term "gay" bears the mark of the Cold War, but also because literature was constrained by it [1]. Meanwhile, science fiction novels have become a hiding place for much gay literature. Writers can use science fiction works to metaphorically convey a variety of thoughts and emotions, and science fiction has thus become an important arena for imagining gender, identity, and the future. Against this backdrop and with these materials, Chi Ta-wei created the work *The Membranes*. In this work, he created a technological era and a future world full of infinite imagination. Instead of pursuing straightforward political declarations, he subtly responded to the traumas and oppressions of the era through the imagination of the future and the exploration of the body. This "membrane" is not only the barrier between reality and fantasy, and the physical and psychological barrier of a strategic island, symbolizing the strict control of avant-garde ideas by the government and society, but also the inner space for social individuals to seek themselves, and furthermore, the channel of information transmission under multiple strict controls.

This paper attempts to explore the multiple core images of the "membrane" as a fluid boundary and the postmodern subject in Chi Ta-wei's work *The Membranes*, and how these core images are related to the geopolitics of the Cold War, queer politics, and individual development. In *The Membranes*, Chi Ta-wei uses science fiction and queer literature as the main literary writing forms. How does he use these strategies to establish this "membrane" that isolates the outside world and protects the true self? How is this "membrane" formed under the influence of the Cold War history and the island - chain politics, and how do the resulting anxiety and trauma affect Chi Ta-wei's writing of *The Membranes*?

2. The core imagery of the "Membrane": a flowing and invisible protective shell

In *The Membranes*, Chi Ta-wei uses this invisible yet visible "membrane" to construct multiple imageries and a rich narrative structure. On the physical level, the "membrane" in the novel protects the residents of the undersea city from external and solar harm, allowing them to live in peace. On the political level, the "membrane" symbolizes the protection and control of Taiwan by the "island-chain strategy" led by the United States during the Cold War.

This "membrane" has rich philosophical attributes: "Removing clothes may reveal the naked body, but peeling the flesh does not necessarily lead to the discovery of the soul - all one can touch is an infinitely deferring membrane." [2] On the front page of the novel, Chi Ta-wei directly points out the philosophical meaning of this membrane. It is an entity, but it has the characteristics of being non - fixed, endless, continuously extending, and repeatedly mutating. This "membrane" cannot be penetrated to reach its depth; instead, it wraps the self and the soul layer by layer.

This "membrane" is the "membrane" of queer politics and that of cross-domain and diverse sexual orientations. In the year 2100, sexual orientation will no longer be a core social controversy, and homosexuality and heterosexuality will no longer be in a binary opposition relationship. However, Chi Ta-wei continues to raise thoughts and questions: "Who decides my body?" Even if we no longer agonize over whether we are homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual or asexual, our bodies and emotions are still not entirely under our own control. At the same time, we can explore the deeper political arena from this perspective. Power relations and power structures will still be engraved on the body in other forms such as technology, the state, and capital, and will be restricted

and controlled by them. Therefore, this layer of "membrane" symbolizes an aspect of the decision-making power over subjectivity and also tears off the protective layer of the single-gender issue.

This "membrane" is the "membrane" of the Cold War's geopolitics, a "membrane" that wraps around the main body but prevents it from seeing the future. During the Cold War, Taiwan was in a special position. It was an extreme anti-communist frontline and also a chain protected by the United States but restricted by it. It not only implies the dual nature of the United States' protection and imprisonment of Taiwan during the Cold War, where the "membrane" was both a barrier to isolate external threats and imposed various constraints and restrictions on internal avant-garde actions. This "membrane" also reflects Taiwan's ambiguous and neglected status in the international community during the Cold War. This "membrane" also hangs over Taiwan, leaving its identity and future uncertain and hard to see clearly.

3. Isolation and protection: literary strategies of form

Chi Ta-wei stands as a leading figure in Taiwanese "science fiction queer literature." His representative works—such as *The Membranes*, *The War Is Over*, *Last Year at Ma Balun*, *Eclipse*, and *In His Eyes*, the *Palm of Your Hand*, a *Red Rose Will Bloom*—project temporal settings into the future, employing the science fiction genre to interrogate issues of identity [3]. Against the oppressive backdrop of martial law and censorship during the Cold War era, a pervasive atmosphere of fear, combined with the widespread societal stigmatization of marginalized groups, precipitated the emergence of gay literature. Within this rigid and repressive sociopolitical framework, the queer community faced severe restrictions on public existence and emotional expression. Consequently, many turned to literature as an outlet. Science fiction naturally emerged as Chi Ta-wei's genre of choice, for it offered a degree of defamiliarization and critical distance. At the time, science fiction was largely perceived as speculative and forward-looking, allowing it to function as a buffer against censorship by presenting content under the guise of imaginative future scenarios. In an era characterized by boundless imagination about the future, science fiction thus became a crucial arena for reimagining gender, identity, and possibilities yet to come [4].

The Membranes is set in a technologically advanced future where humanity, forced to abandon the sun-scorched surface of Earth, has relocated to submerged habitats on the ocean floor. This entire narrative, however, unfolds within a simulated realm—a digital landscape generated within the mind of the protagonist, Momo, constructed entirely through disc-books fed by a simulation mechanism. These simulated inputs form the entirety of Momo's perception of reality and lived experience. Within this speculative world, the social inequities of the actual world are erased: homosexuality supplants heterosexuality as the societal norm, while distinctions between human and non-human, male and female, are deliberately blurred. These eccentric and surreal imaginings reflect Chi Ta-wei's imposition of his subjective vision onto the fictional social framework—a manifestation of his disengagement from and disillusionment with the real world. Dissatisfied with the Cold War-era stigmatization of homosexuality as "deviant" and a "threat to national security," [5] he seeks to dismantle such problematic labels. By turning to science fiction, he conjures an alternative sanctuary for marginalized groups amid global turbulence. Confronted with an unsettling and sorrowful reality, he employs the genre both as a refuge from unfounded societal and governmental censure and as a liberated medium to articulate and safeguard an idealized, pure utopia.

This "membrane" extends beyond mere textual content to encompass literary form and narrative structure itself, functioning as a form of resistance. Constructed through the genre of science fiction, it serves as a medium for filtering, distorting, and obscuring information—effectively a metaphor for unreliable narration. Within the oppressive context of martial law and censorship, Chi Ta-wei

employs science fiction as a discursive strategy, transforming queer literature into a clandestine art of secrecy. Through the genre's inherent ambiguity, intricacy, and nuance, he narrates histories, politics, and emotions prohibited by official discourse. As Kim Soo-jin observes, "His vision of the future is precisely aimed at questioning the deeply ingrained assumptions of normality and binary oppositions in our perception, while unsettling all that is reduced to fixed conceptualizations" [6]. By harnessing futuristic means, he captures the dilemmas and anxieties of society and individuals during the Cold War era—a testament to literature's self-awareness and critical reflection under political constraints.

4. The refraction of Cold War history: anxiety, trauma, and the unspeakable

During the Cold War, Taiwan found itself in a precarious frontline position—not only serving as a critical node in the U.S.-led "First Island Chain" strategy to contain Asia, but also acting as a strategic pawn in the Sino-American confrontation. This frontline status tightly bound Taiwan's fate and security to America's global strategy, subjecting it to external constraints and significantly undermining its autonomy. Such a geopolitical predicament resonates with the plight of Momo in *The Membranes*: she is enveloped by an imperceptible "membrane," controlled by an illusory world, incessantly implanted with disc-books from her mother, laden with memories conveyed through imagery, and "protected" by the high-definition pixels of a simulated reality. Like Taiwan during the Cold War, Momo exists in a state of passivity, suspension, encapsulation, uncertainty, and predetermined identity. The "membrane" serves both as a geographical metaphor for the island chain and a poignant reflection of the island's suspended agency and imposed identity. Chi Ta-wei looks toward the future while subtly satirizing Taiwan's contemporary realities.

The Cold War not only shaped Taiwan's suspended and passive geopolitical relations, but also defined the connotations of "comrade" from a cultural perspective. The history of comrade literature is a product of the Cold War, indicating that Taiwanese society and its people's understanding of homosexuality largely stems from the influence of McCarthyism in the United States during that era [1]. Within the historical framework of the Cold War, newspapers and media outlets of that time continuously instilled anti-homosexual sentiments among the general public. Domestically, the Kuomintang regime continuously sought to consolidate its political authority by promoting modern Chinese as a crucial tool for education and dissemination, countering the mainland's adoption of simplified Chinese. This process of cultural and linguistic construction gradually evolved into an instrument for marginalizing and criticizing homosexuality and comrade identities. Having grown up in such a historical context, Chi Ta-wei developed an understanding of self and the world that is deeply marked by the historical stigma of anti-homosexual hostility and exclusion prevalent during the Cold War, alongside a psychological resistance to such attitudes.

Hence, in the novel, such anxiety and resistance are continually manifested through the protagonist, Momo. The narrative is set in a technologically advanced futuristic world where emotional apathy and nihilism prevail, a context that intrinsically embodies and amplifies the trauma of the Cold War frontier. The complex dynamics of love, resentment, and despair between Momo and her mother—triggered by themes such as gender-affirming surgery, implanted memories, and militarized mind control—serve as metaphors for the unspeakable familial politics arising from Cold War trauma among the populace. During the Cold War, Taiwanese society was permeated by the White Terror, wherein all avant-garde ideas were labeled as heresy, and any unconventional identities or literary forms were constrained by Cold War ideologies. This repression, in turn, fueled Chi Ta-wei's literary rebellion, as reflected in his work. In *The Membranes*, the protagonist Momo is compelled to undergo a transition from male to female, a subversion of gender identity and

dissolution of gender boundaries that can be interpreted as a potent resistance against the rigid identities imposed on individuals during the Cold War era. As a cyborg that can be manufactured, modified, and disposed of at will, Momo's existence poignantly mirrors the powerlessness and oppression experienced by Taiwan, which was reduced to a pawn manipulated by major powers during the Cold War.

5. Conclusion

The Cold War serves as a critical key to understanding Chi Ta-wei's literary writings. His work is profoundly intertwined and co-constituted with the Cold War, wherein he not only subtly and resistantly responds to the oppression induced by the Cold War in his literary creations, but also rigorously links Cold War history with the history of queer literature in Taiwan through multiple academic studies. This deep influence is especially manifested in his work *The Membranes*, where Chi internalizes Taiwan's geopolitical predicament—marked by a passive position and frontline tensions during the Cold War—as a rich literary imagination, a profound emotional structure, and a form of ideological resistance. He transmutes the strategic reality of the island chain into the internalized existence of the "membrane," and transforms the ideological exclusion of queer identities during the Cold War into a literary challenge—a confrontation of queer culture against political and institutional norms. With seductive, provocative, and carnivalesque language, Chi Ta-wei confronts traditional gender roles and heteronormative conventions [7]. This adversarial stance resonates with Taiwan's historical position during the Cold War—a period characterized by passive reception of major-power dominance and a lack of autonomous subjectivity. Thus, *The Membranes* is not merely a pioneering work of queer science fiction; it also functions as a literary prism through which the profound historical imprints left by the Cold War on individuals are refracted and illuminated.

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