Proceedings of ICIHCS 2026 Symposium: Alternate Narratives and Cross-Cultural Visions in a Globalized World
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.HT36524

Exploring the Universal Humanistic Concern in Pai Hsien-yung's Fiction Through the Homosexual Characters

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Abstract. Gay characters in Pai Hsien-yung's fiction underwent an evolution from early expressions of individual and implicit emotions,through the middle period in which the living state of the gay community is fully presented, to later writings with a global perspective.Through literature research and textual analysis, and by integrating existing findings from academic monographs and journal articles, this study systematically examines the creation of Pai Hsien-yung's gay fiction across different stages.Moreover,the study delves into how his early unsettled life,experience with chronic illness and the process of self-identity influenced his portrayals of gay characters,so as to enhance further understanding of the author's concern for humanity.Pai Hsien-yung,with his compassionate heart,explores the true nature shared by these characters and defends their individual dignity.Meanwhile,his stories focusing on AIDS embody both a global vision and humanistic care,highlighting the author's idea of a community of shared future for mankind.Nevertheless,these works also imply that there are numerous practical obstacles that the gay community still confronts when striving for equal recognition.

Keywords: Pai Hsien-yung, gay characters, humanistic care, universal value

1. Introduction

There are no forbidden areas in literature. Neither social life nor spiritual life should be excluded from literary production [1]. Homosexuality is both a social phenomenon that exists objectively and a spiritual one that reflects individual psychology. In literary works at all times and in all lands, homosexuality is presented in a variety of forms. Pai Hsien-yung is recognized as one of the most representative writers depicting gay characters in contemporary Chinese literature. To date, while there is a substantial body of scholarly research on Pai Hsien-yung,most of these studies are grounded in interpretations of the thematic implications of his works, pertaining to displacement, loneliness, illness narratives and cultural nostalgia. A holistic examination of his gay fiction remains to be supplemented and improved. In the present study, the characteristics of gay characters created by Pai Hsien-yung in different periods are systematically analyzed. At the same time, with the author's personal life experiences, the paper examines how they influenced the shaping of those characters. On this basis, the humanistic connotations and the sentiment of universal compassion existing in his works can be deeply understood.

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2. The periods and characteristics of Pai Hsien-yung's creation of gay characters

In the 1960s, Pai Hsien-yung was still a fledgling writer in literary circles, but his bold attempts with same-sex themes were not hindered. *Moon Dream* (1960), the first of his works to portray gay characters, reveals Wu Zhongying's morbid obsession with his prematurely deceased young lover, Jingsi, through memories and dreams beneath the moonlight. In *Youth* (1961), an old painter,upon capturing the image of youth in a sixteen-year-old male model,is driven to frantically seize the lost time. However, he lapses into madness and eventually dies on rocks. The protagonist in *Lonely Seventeen* (1961) is the earliest to manifest struggles and bewilderment concerning self-identity [2]. Within Yang Yunfeng's lonely and repressed inner world, only the class monitor, Wei Boyang, gives him sincere kindness, making him extremely dependent on this boy; yet gossip drifts them apart.Subsequently, owing to the apology letter incident, he is ridiculed once again. He flees to the New Park, where he is unexpectedly forcibly kissed by a strange man. This experience that goes beyond his cognition of same-sex affection,deepens his guilt and self-loathing, even leading him to suicide by lying on the railway tracks. It is evident that, in the early period, Pai Hsien-yung tended to implicitly express homosexual emotions which were often enveloped in a tragic tone namely obsession induced by death,the soul devoured by desire and harrowing past experiences. These characters were immersed in profound suffering through the desperate yearning for affection yet failed to attain it [3].

Distinct from the implicitness of his early stories, *Crystal Boys* (1983), a mid-period novel unflinchingly exposes the survival dilemma of the gay community, who are exiled for not being accepted by families and society. The conception of this novel began in the early 1970s, but not until 1983 was it officially published.Pai Hsien-yung admitted that the writing process was very arduous,for his purpose was not merely to write about homosexuality but also to scrutinize Chinese patriarchal society. To this end, he was continually seeking an appropriate form to convey complex meanings within the novel [4]. The novel, narrated from the perspective of Li Qing, depicts the "dark kingdom" in Taipei's New Park and the "birds of youth" hiding therein, represented by Little Jade, Wu Min, Mousey, A-Feng and Wang Kuilong. These characters suffer discrimination and oppression in terms of social gender in that their sexual orientation deviates from the mainstream; they can only skulk in dark corners because they lack legitimate living spaces; and being homeless, they possess no social identity and have no connection with society,thus finding no value of their own existence. All these factors shape a spiritual world that is profoundly lonely and stifled,yet intensely longing for love and belonging [3]. For these "crystal boys" drifting on social margins, Pai Hsien-yung offers the utmost understanding and tolerance. Neither is their fallen living state deliberately glossed over by the author, nor is the kind and pure side within them left unexplored with compassion.For instance, the author depicts scenes of transfusing blood to Wu Min after his wrist-slashing suicide, protecting the bullied younger brother, and caring for Grandpa Fu until his death. The novel focuses on the fates of these characters and unfolds the complexity of human nature; in the meantime, it also strikes straight at the society they inhabit [5].

In Pai Haisen-yung's late gay fiction, AIDS was regarded as an important subject matter. In *Danny Boy* (2001), after being informed of his HIV infection, Yun Ge attempts suicide but survives. Then he is taken into Shanti House, where he takes care of Danny, a young boy with little time left. Yun Ge pours all repressed obsessions and affections accumulated over the years for lonely boys into Danny. Through this, his desolate heart finally finds the meaning of life. Tea for Two was originally a gay bar; however, as a result of an epidemic invasion, the bar ends up vanishing, and many old friends also lost their lives. The bar owners, David and Tony, are doomed as well.

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Accompanying each other for decades, they finally choose to meet the end of their lives with dignity. Through literature, the living circumstances and inner world of the gay community under the shadow of the epidemic are profoundly reflected by Pai Hsien-yung. His works also break through the limitations of region, race, nation and culture, adopting a global vision and delving into the common destinies and emotions of humanity, conveying the humanistic care with everlasting significance.

3. The connection between personal life experiences and gay characters

Pai Hsien-yung was born in Guilin, Guangxi and grew up during turbulent years. Due to the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, his family relocated to Chongqing. After the victory of the war, they returned to Nanjing, later moving successively to Shanghai and Hong Kong. In the early 1950s, Pai Hsien-yung was reunited with his parents in Taipei. In the early 1960s, his mother succumbed to illness, which dealt an immense mental blow to him. Never before had he encountered death in fact, nor had he keenly felt its irresistible might [6]. Afterwards, Pai Hsien-yung went to the United States to study and took up a teaching position for three decades. He often fell into anxiety and perplexity due to the shifting surroundings. And this sense of displacement is also reflected in the gay characters he created, most of whom have no anchorage for their souls and crave love and destinations, yet wander continuously. In *Lonely Seventeen*, for example, Yang Yunfeng describes himself as a lonely ghost. Nevertheless, there is an extreme yearning for family affection and friendship inside him. In his words, if anyone were willing to give him a little kindness, he would be eager to lay his heart bare to that person [7]. The feeling of drifting is manifested not only as unfulfilled emotional longing, but also as pathos of fleeting youth and the powerlessness against time (Moon Dream, Youth), together with the loneliness and disorientation shackled by traditional ethics and rejected by family and society (*Crystal Boys, Danny Boy, Tea for Two*) [8].

After entering primary school, Pai Hsien-yung contracted lung disease. There was no specific cure for tuberculosis at that time, so he was forced into isolation. He became exceptionally sensitive and withdrawn for the fear brought by death and the absence of company from kin and friends during his upbringing environment. Not only did his character change by this illness lasting four to five years,but his later literary creation was also influenced. Throughout all stages of Pai Hsien-yung's gay fiction, the two major motifs of "death" and "disease" are always inevitable. In *Moon Dream*, both Jingsi and an orphan from the mission middle school die of pneumonia; in *Crystal Boys*,characters such as Wu Min, Wang Kuilong and Fu Wei all exhibit suicidal behavior; and in his later writings of similar themes, with AIDS as background, while struggling painfully with this incurable disease, various characters also embody the sincere affection as they stand by one another through thick and thin.Initially, the helplessness confronting illness, along with grief and trepidation over the fragility of life permeates between the lines. However, in *Crystal Boys*, sympathy and pity are conveyed toward these socially marginalized characters, who not only suffer discrimination and oppression but also endure the agony of sickness. In the later period, the author's understanding of disease and death is markedly sublimated. Even though death is unavoidable, people can gain redemption through the warmth of mutual companionship and attain inner peace within the finite span of life [9].

During his childhood, Pai Hsien-yung vaguely realized that his sexual orientation was different from others, which aroused psychological inversion in him. In his view, the ethics and morality governed by society could be abided by most people,but for the few, a strong urge to break free from fetters of rules is carried in their nature, even if it means a tragic outcome [10]. This point is

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especially evident in *Crystal Boys*. Although the novel focuses on the gay community, far more than same-sex affection, it also portrays the inescapable fate of human beings. Because of their sexual orientation, A-Qing and his companions are ostracized, struggling at the lowest rungs of society. Regarding this, it is merely stated in the novel that this is inherent in their blood. Passed down orally through generations, the legendary love of Longzi and A-Feng has long prevailed in the New Park. By nature, A-Feng is obstinate and unruly. Only when facing Longzi, he sinks deep into a sense of inferiority to choose flight. Similarly, Longzi, though born into a distinguished family with a promising future, is frantically obsessed with A-Feng, even resorting to violence to end A-Feng's life. The tragedy of the Long-Feng romance precisely mirrors that marginal groups, being at a disadvantage in social gender, are trapped by an inescapable fate when resisting heterosexual hegemony [11].

4. The universal value of gay characters in Pai Hsien-yung's writings

For a long time, prejudices and discrimination towards the gay community have persisted in society, while society turns a deaf ear to their emotions and appeals as ordinary people. It is precisely because Pai Hsien-yung is aware of this that his writing extends beyond same-sex love. Instead, he centers on humanity itself, expressing their yearning to love and be loved, as well as the fears of death, illness, and loneliness, all of which are a true reflection of universal human nature. Pai Hsien-yung believes that homosexuals are also human beings, and as such their identity must be restored. Moreover, he holds a positive attitude towards human nature, believing that although humans have shadowy sides, they also retain the dignity inherent in being human. Out of this belief,despite human desires, greed and even sins presented in his works, he consistently avoids the utter loss of humanity. For instance, in *Crystal Boys*, where characters like Li Qing are fortunate to be sheltered by Grandpa Fu. Pai Hsien-yung always gives those trapped by fate opportunities for resistance and a glimmer of hope so that they are able to achieve reconciliation with themselves, their families and even society, while also enjoying the freedom to be their true selves [12].

This humanistic concern continued into the later epidemic writings on AIDS. In the early 1980s, AIDS originated among the gay community in the United States, and then rapidly swept across the globe, with Taiwan also involved. Owing to the limited medical conditions and the superficial understanding at that time, AIDS was generally regarded as a disease peculiar to homosexuals. And accordingly, this group was subjected to malicious attacks and accusations from society. Many media also disregarded the facts, sensationalized relevant information and inflicted tremendous harm on patients and their families. In this case, Pai Hsien-yung keenly perceived that this epidemic was by no means merely about a certain group, region, or nation, but rather about people worldwide with a shared future. After that, Pai Hsien-yung set about engaging in AIDS prevention and control campaigns to help people correctly understand this disease. Additionally, he also conducted related writings, committing to removing the stigma from the gay community. His stories like *Danny Boy*, *Tea for Two*, and *Silent Nigh*t feature AIDS patients as protagonists. Not only do these works reveal the severe traumas resulting from AIDS on individuals and society, but also highlight the true essence of life of the gay community, who pull together in the face of this crisis.

Homosexuality has existed from ancient times to the present.Just like heterosexuality, it also rests on sincere emotions among individuals thereby building intimate relationships. And the need for personality, dignity, emotions and rights is equally present in both, with no distinction of superiority or inferiority. When facing common crises of humanity,only when prejudices and barriers are broken down and challenges are tackled with joint efforts can mankind overcome worldwide diseases, sufferings and disasters as well as coexist harmoniously on the earth [13].

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5. Conclusion

This paper takes the gay characters in Pai Hsien-yung's fiction as a starting point. By analyzing stage characteristics and the creative motivations, it probes what ideological connections these characters are endowed with, thereby developing a holistic understanding of the author's creation of same-sex subject matter. Pai Hsien-yung has consistently harbored sympathy and compassion for the gay community, striving to seek a haven of the soul and granting them respect and understanding. All of these allow his works to boast profound realistic significance and humanistic value. However, the cited references to previous scholarly works are limited, and the examination of relevant influencing factors concerning Pai Hsien-yung's portrayal of gay characters remains insufficient. Accordingly, further expansion of the scope of textual research is essential, so as to construct a more comprehensive understanding.

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