Chen Xue’s Queer Tactics

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In recent years, “queer” (e.g., tongzhi, ku'er, guaitai, or xie) has become the focal point for discussions about sexuality in Taiwan, alongside the older terms lesbian and gay. Queer also appears in Taiwan in queer theory, a literary-political movement to draw on poststructuralist identity theory as a means of breaking down essentialized sexuality and gender categories, and advocating a sexual-identity politics on the basis of difference and multiplicity. Like any theory, queer theory emerged from a specific epistemological context, in this case the Anglo-American academy. Like other signs, queer can move from one conditioning context to another conditioning context, where inevitably it will take on different meanings.¹ This article maps some of the different conditions queer is encountering in contemporary Taiwan, in order to illustrate how rewriting queer under new conditions shows up the earlier projects’ very limits. My hope in discussing how queer is being reproduced in Taiwan is to make the limits more apparent and thereby

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to contribute to the project of queering globalized queer theory. The less globally circulated text I consider here is Taiwan lesbian writer Chen Xue’s 1995 story “Searching for the Lost Wings of the Angel.”

Central to the traditional Chinese patrilineal family model, whose primary work is the transmission of the paternal surname through the production of male heirs, is the virtue of filiality or xiao, the symbolic core of the practice of family.\textsuperscript{2} Xiao requires of children that they fulfill their role as children by showing both parents respect, reverence, and obedience (traditionally continuing after their death in the form of ritual sacrifice and worship). In concrete terms, this means that once children are economically independent, they are expected to support their living parents both emotionally and financially, ostensibly to repay the parents for having done the same for them as children.\textsuperscript{3}

This traditional model of the family continues to exert significant influence in the contemporary state of the Republic of China. This fact is attested to, for example, by the continuing struggles of feminist groups over the reform of family law, which, Huang Yu-Xiu argues, is constructed on the principle of the priority of the father’s and the husband’s right.\textsuperscript{4} Thus, under current Taiwan family law, children or heirs unequivocally “belong” to the paternal family, the source of the family name to be transmitted through them. Gu Min-Lun gives a succinct account of some of the effects of xiao on homosexual children in Taiwan:

[In Taiwan, children reach] economic independence much later than in Euro-American societies, and before marriage . . . parents bear the cost of children’s education and living expenses. This expenditure creates a non-specified contract, which children repay when they support the parents in their old age. . . . This relationship . . . also extends to the emotions and the moral code. . . . The contract doesn’t need both parties to recognize it; this is what they call “xiao”: the parents’ generation’s financial and emotional investment will be repaid in the form of the children’s generation’s feelings toward the parents. . . . Any deviation from this form breaks the rules of behavior specified by the contract, is “unfilial,” “the greatest
offence.” Very unfortunately, “being homosexual” is one way of breaking the contract.

A primary object of critique in this article is Judith Butler’s theorization of the performativity of the Lacanian law of the symbolic. A reading of the figuration of subject formation in Chen Xue’s fictional text is a starting point for such a critique. In order to first make the function of xiao legible to Butler’s theory, I wish to translate the idea of subject formation via xiao into the Lacanian terms that Butler takes up and rewrites. In these terms, then, if xiao is a primary value at the center of the practice of family, it becomes readable as the primary law by which subjects under its rule enter discourse. Put another way, the subject enters symbolic discourse by the citation of the law that requires xiao; failure to cite this law and to take on the role of filial child (i.e., person) results in being classified with infants and beasts and, these days, homosexuals: as an incoherent nonsubject outside the symbolic realm. Homosexual children threaten to break the first condition of xiao, that is, that descendents be produced. Thus, Gu argues that to claim a homosexual identity is to break the contract of xiao; once interpellated as bu xiao (and thus symbolically expelled from the family), the homosexual then logically loses the status of person. A seemingly irresolvable conflict emerges through this analysis, between familially inflected subjectivity and the claiming of homosexual identities. Chen Xue’s text partly addresses this question of how such a familial authority might be challenged and rewritten by emergent “queer subjects.”

Judith Butler’s theorization of the performativity of sexed positions arises from J. L. Austin’s speech act theory, in which an illocutionary performatative constitutes a discursive practice enacting or producing what it speaks, in speaking. The performative mode is able to accomplish this only through the repetition or citation of previously established norms; for Butler this citation also produces the power to which it appeals. In Butler’s consideration of the role of citation in enabling a performatively constructed authority, she thus suggests, first, that discourse gains the authority to bring about what it names “through citing the conventions of authority” and, second,
that a subject “appears as the author of its discursive effects to the extent that the citational practice by which s/he is conditioned and mobilized remains unmarked.”9 In the case of a judge citing the law in bringing down a sentence, then, the authority of the law itself comes about — and comes to appear as already there — through the judge’s citation of it, while the authority of the judge himself also comes about through his citation of the law: the authoritative subject and the authority to which the subject appeals both derive from practices of citation.

Proposing citation as the vehicle of an authority or law that constructs itself as already there through this repeated citation (for instance, the Lacanian law that compels the assumption of a sex) assumes that authority to be singular, as in the courtroom scenario above where one judge cites a single legal code. Indeed, Austin’s first rule for the happy functioning of a performative is as follows: “There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances.”10 That is to say, following Butler’s adoption of Jacques Derrida’s formulation, in which the invocation of this conventional procedure constitutes a citation, a singular and unproblematically knowable set of conventions attaching to the act is to be cited by those who perform it.

What would happen if the transparency and singularity of the set of conventions that must be cited in order for the authority to be performatively constructed were in question? This is in part the query raised by Derrida’s critique of Austin’s formulation of the context of the performative’s utterance, in his essay “Signature, Event, Context.”11 In this essay Derrida argues that citationality and repetition — iterability — is the condition of the functioning of every sign, so that Austin’s assertion that certain types of citation are merely “parasitic” upon the “ordinary” use of language becomes contradictory. Importantly, Derrida maintains that every sign will continue to function — albeit in different ways — outside the chain (or context) in which it was first inserted, that all signs may be “grafted” into other chains and continue to signify.12 Furthermore, he holds that this “possibility” is not of the order of a “merely” possible occurrence but, rather, that it is internal to the very structure of the sign. Where Austin argues that theatrical, poetic, or other “non-serious” utterances of performatives are merely “parasitic,”
Derrida maintains that these examples only deploy a different degree of the citationality that is structurally internal to all performative utterances and to all utterances generally: “The possibility of disengagement and citational graft . . . belongs to the structure of every mark.” Since the mark signifies by enacting a citation—as it must, since the conditions of its very iterability are citation and repetition—it is always possible that it will end up citing something else. The effect of the utterance is controlled neither by the apparent context in which it is uttered nor by the speaker who might presume to control it. Thus it emerges that every mark is already characterized by this ever present, internal multiplicity of possible citations.

The sort of questions I address in this essay are already present in Austin’s text, for example in the following passage: “Consider ‘I divorce you,’ said to a wife by her husband in a Christian country, and both being Christians rather than Mohammedans [sic]. In this case it might be said . . . ‘we (we) do not admit any procedure at all for effecting divorce—marriage is indissoluble.’” Here, an imagined other—the supposed Islamic laws of marriage—appears menacingly alongside the ineffective attempt at divorce under Christian law, necessitating the defensively doubled and emphasized we, which reasserts the monologic authority of a familiar law. But of course the effect of the imagined contrast with supposedly Islamic marriage law is to suggest that the ritual of divorce will have different and possibly contradictory effects depending on which of the laws is taken to be cited with the words “I divorce you.” And surely the shadowy Islamic law lurking in Austin’s text here also raises the nightmarish possibility that it may be less than perfectly clear exactly which law we should be taken to be citing with our speech on any given occasion. This scene of ambivalent divorce, overseen by not one but (at least) two authorities, two contexts, illustrates Derrida’s point about the ever present, constitutive possibility that the performative utterance will cite “the wrong law” and produce unforeseen effects. Butler proposes that the collective, performative cry of “queer!” may operate as a crucial “outside” to the performatives of the heterosexual marriage ceremony. This ominous moment in Austin, when the similarly heterosexualized performative of the divorce ritual undergoes a crisis of authority as a foreign law makes its presence felt at the edges of the scene, then impels the argument that I seek to make in
this essay: that, likewise, queer must also cite laws other than the expected ones and produce effects perhaps quite unforeseen in the contexts of its original production.

I suggest in the following reading of Chen Xue’s story that this text raises just such questions. What might happen both to authority and to the possibility of contestation, when not one but multiple laws or conventions are simultaneously available or enforced? This text can be read as pointing up the internally split character of citation itself, as it cites practices and signs in order to show the multiple discourses to which such citations appeal for—and hence reinstall as—authority. In this reading, the force of one authority is challenged by the parallel presence of another, to the point where enabling gaps and slippages may appear between them. Derrida argues that this inevitable split within the sign is internal to the structure of something like “language itself”; but perhaps texts such as Chen Xue’s show that the conditions of postcoloniality must exacerbate such a drift of language from the confines of singular authority. Perhaps, indeed, the sudden proliferation of available authorities and laws in postcoloniality might even be taken to constitute the historical conditions of possibility for such a drift.

“Searching for the Lost Wings of the Angel” is an intertwining of two narrative threads. One thread follows the fragmented memories and musings of the woman Cao-Cao about her childhood and particularly her confused and painful relationship with her mother. It emerges that after the father’s death, Cao-Cao’s mother disappeared for a year, leaving the young girl with her aging grandfather in the country. Her mother later reappeared to take Cao-Cao to live in the city, where the mother worked as a prostitute and Cao-Cao attended first school, then university. The second narrative thread is about Cao-Cao’s relationship with the woman A’Su, whom she meets one night in a bar and goes to live with. A’Su, also a prostitute, is in love with Cao-Cao and encourages her writing, which previously Cao-Cao had always destroyed upon completion. Finally A’Su mysteriously vanishes as though she had been a dream, leaving Cao-Cao with the completed manuscript of “Searching for the Lost Wings of the Angel.” Ultimately, visiting her dead mother’s grave, Cao-Cao realizes upon reading her mother’s name on the tombstone that her mother is A’Su.
The title of the collection in which the story “Searching for the Lost Wings of the Angel” appears, Enü Shu [The book of wrongful women], is readable as a skewed citation of the ideal figure of the lienü. The lienü, of the title Lienü Zhuan [The book of virtuous women], a classic book of women’s social education, is the ideal of feminine Confucian virtue, referring especially to a widow who prefers death to remarriage. The title of this collection, then, deliberately cites only to invert lienü to become The Book of Wrongful Women. In this reading, the enü would stand for all that is rejected from the ideal lienü, the constitutive outside against which this figure of traditional feminine virtue must define itself. Ding Naifei notes the presence of the term enü in the sexual-hygienic manuals of the late Ming, where it was used to denote those women whose physical and sexual characteristics made them dangerous and undesirable to men, implicitly opposite to the ideal lienü wife. The stories in Chen Xue’s collection are populated with women like the characters of the story “Searching”: the lesbian daughter and the mother who, far from remaining chaste or dying, becomes a prostitute after the death of her husband.

Presenting itself as a book of lesbian fiction, Enü Shu raises, in its choice of title, the question of the contestatory potential of such an appropriation of the rejected realm of femininity that constitutes the enü. The status of this citation of enü as contestatory or conservative is what is at stake in the discussion developed between the preface of this collection, by Yang Zhao, and that of Chen’s second collection, Mengyou 1994 [Sleepwalking 1994], by Davy Chi, over the value to be read from the term e. Yang reads the e in enü as that signaling zuı’e (guilt, crime), and in his magnanimous desire to cure lesbian desire of such internalized guilt, asks impassionedly, “Actually, what is e in lesbianism? What is e in female desire? . . . What is e in Enü Shu?” Chi responds by claiming the e as also readable through the more subversive term xie’e (wicked): “The e of Enü Shu might also be interpreted in relation to the term xie’e, with its strong contestatory flavour, rather than the guilt-laden zuı’e. ‘Wickedness’ has long been a term appropriated by the women’s movement to protest the hypocrisy of patriarchy. Surely ‘e’ cannot be limited to one single interpretation.” Against Yang’s naive reading of the text’s self-nomination as e as signaling internalized homophobia, Chi asserts the contestatory potential of appropriating the rejected, perhaps analogously to
the ways in which the term *queer* is mobilized against, yet through, its history of homophobic abuse, as a sign of antihomophobic resistance. Indeed the term *xie’e*, whose cause Chi champions here, has an etymological as well as a functional parallel with *queer* used as a refunctioned tool of affirmation, since *xie* has itself been mobilized as a translation of *queer*. In Chi’s reading, then, the story asserts the *enü* as the constitutive outside *lienü* and raises the possibility that such a rejected outside may be mobilized as a form of contestation of the law of *lienü*.

If the *enü* is readable as a contestatory skewed citation of the *lienü* and all that it disallows, the interesting question now is how, exactly, the *enü* asserts itself in relation to the *lienü*: in what register is a traditional feminine code of behavior now being cited in order to produce its resistive other? Initially, the story “Searching” might seem to enact directly contestatory citations of the *enü*. As mentioned above, the mother who abandons her child and works as a prostitute after her husband’s death and the lesbian daughter who loves her mother sexually are both readable as something approximating an opposite to or a clean refusal of traditional feminine morality. Yet toward the end of the story a more complex citation of a family-centered feminine morality begins to occur, exemplified in the passage in which Cao-Cao and her mother visit her father’s grave:

We came to the graveyard where my father was buried. This was the first time, the first time after Father died that I had been here with her.

The nighttime graveyard was so calm and quiet. Amid the tall grass, fireflies flew here and there; my mother in her white shirt and white skirt moved slowly through the grass under the silverwhite moonlight, like a beautiful female ghost floating above the earth.

“‘This is Cao-Cao, our child, isn’t she beautiful! She’s as clever as you. She’s not ungrateful to you, she’s passed the university entrance exams. We’ve finally seen her to adulthood.

“And I miss you so much. . . .”

The night breeze rustled; her voice was bright and clear, light and happy, like the humming voices of primary-school children on their way home after class. I looked at the headstone with Father’s name on it. The mound was covered with weeds like his disorderly hair, and the father
I'd forgotten suddenly appeared before my eyes, riding his old bicycle, wearing his black-framed glasses on his nose, shouting while still a great distance from the gate:

“Cao-Cao, Daddy's home!”

He was still so young.

I turned my head to look at my mother and found that she had cut her hair, and her round smiling face had become very childlike. She squatted on the earth, her hands gently stroking the headstone as though caressing the chest of the man she loved, her face overfilled with joy.

At that moment I suddenly wanted to hold her tight, to tell her out loud that I loved her, in fact I had loved her all along, no matter what she had done, nothing could change the way I loved her.\(^{21}\)

Adumbrating her death by suicide soon afterward, in this passage Cao-Cao’s mother has already become like a ghost—not accidentally, perhaps, as she performs the ritual act of visiting her dead husband’s grave to show her devotion. Further, she has cut her hair, like a nun or a child, marking her passage away from a female adult subject-position toward separation from the world of the living, which again foreshadows her coming death. The young father has also come back to life here to head the family, which is now becoming almost ironically proper, complete with devoted wife and mother, living father, and finally, the daughter who now momentarily approaches an appropriate form of love for her mother. What is cited here is not only the discourse of the lienü but the ideal model of the jia (family) itself, magically reconstituted through properly performed ritual and memory.

Nevertheless, there is certainly something queer going on. The shocking fact remains that Cao-Cao’s love for her mother, which begins to assert itself in the passage above, turns out not to be properly filial but, rather, to be scandalously lesbian—or perhaps it rewrites the filial as lesbian, or at least as constituted in part by an erotic mother-daughter desire. As Cao-Cao’s filial love for her mother is rendered hyperbolic as lesbian love, similarly her mother’s response to the moral code that insists on her faithfulness to her dead husband leads her to the extremest action in suicide, as the jia is rewritten as a strange parody of the ideal whose law it thus destabilizes. What is invoked here is a kind of “hyper-jia,” which no longer rejects but
contains and is defined by the enü daughter who loves her mother sexually. The textual strategy is thus not simply to answer back to the moral code that conditions the lienü and also produces the enü, by a straight assertion of the enü’s value. Rather, the text meticulously cites and then skewes the signs of the lienü and the contemporary perfect family (meimande jiating). Thus the figure of the enü emerges as both resistant to the moral code and absolutely contingent on and conditioned by it. The forms of female subjectivity in play in this text cannot place themselves somehow outside the laws of behavior that govern feminine virtue; rather, they are enacted through skewed and hyperbolic citations of those same laws. Thus, Cao-Cao’s mother is a prostitute who in suicide enacts the harshest classical behavioral code for faithful widows; Cao-Cao herself is a daughter whose filial love for her mother is rescuable only as lesbian desire.

The relation of enü to lienü, then, can be read as addressing the contestatory potential of the constitutive “outside” of an authorized gender-position. Such a reading, though, does not begin to address the question that I want mainly to consider in this essay, that is, the question of multiple possible authorities to which a citation might appeal for its effects. Lienü to enü remains a binary relationship that is intelligible inside only one set of discursive systems, those conditioned by traditional Chinese laws of feminine virtue. Consider what happens when citation appeals to more than one such authoritative system.

A pivotal moment in the story comes when the name of Cao-Cao’s mother is read on her tombstone, the moment in which it is revealed that the nickname A’Su in fact refers to Cao-Cao’s own dead mother’s name, Su Qing-Yu. The recognition is the story’s resolution, because it transforms Cao-Cao’s ambivalence toward her mother into absolute love and, scandalously, lesbian desire:

“Somewhere.”
I remembered A’Su had said, Somewhere, the answer must be there.
Where?
I have to find it. I’ll jump onto a bus, I’ll board a train, I might even catch a plane. I don’t know how I’ll do it, but I know a voice is calling me, and I’m gradually getting nearer to it.
A grave? What I’m searching for is a grave.
Next to my father’s grave lies another one. I approach it; carved on the
slab of marble of the tombstone are some characters:
“—Su Qing-Yu—”
Su Qing-Yu, that is my mother’s name.
Mother, I’ve come back. After fleeing you for so many years, I’ve
finally come back.
I lie before my mother’s grave as though curled in her womb, mum-
bling. I describe to her the feelings I’ve never revealed. It’s as painstaking
as learning to speak. After all the time I have wandered and floated
about, this is the first time I feel the firm solidness of the earth; at last I
can distinguish my feelings for my mother.
“I love you, absolutely.”22

This recognition is the end and the resolution of the story, the moment
when Cao-Cao is symbolically liberated from the devouring ambivalence
toward her mother and is “reborn” into language in the words that had until
now been unspeakable. We might say, Cao-Cao accedes in this moment,
from a floating prelinguistic realm, to the solid earth of an intelligible sub-
ject-position inside the symbolic. But she does this through the memory of
love associated with the name of the mother. The movement of the story is
then legible as a queering of the Lacanian law that states that the subject
comes into the symbolic through sacrificing the maternal bond under the
threat of punishment in the name of the father. It is as though in this rewrit-
ing, the subject magically gets it both ways and furthermore does so in the
wrong name, maintaining an imaginary bond with the mother while she
claims a coherent place inside the linguistic order—in her name. But is
the Lacanian law of the father all that gets cited or queered with this inter-
vention in the name of the mother?

A different reading presents itself when the name of the mother is read
in terms of traditional family structure, in which once again the name of the
father is privileged, this time in the central significance attached to contin-
uing the family line in the production of male heirs (chuan zong jie dai). If
this traditional law is readable as the imperative to reproduce the father’s
family name, then it is remarkable that in this story the name of Cao-Cao’s
father never appears in the text, while the revelation of the three characters of her mother’s name finally allows Cao-Cao to assume the position of subject. Thus, the privileging of the name of the mother contests the gendering not only of a Lacanian law of subjectivation but also of a traditional-familial law of hierarchy, by reversing the expected gender of the privileged parent and by conversely empowering the relatively inconsequential name of the mother. Aside from the text’s investment in rewriting patriarchal structures as implicitly matriarchal, what is interesting here is the impossibility of finally telling which of the structures cited—psychoanalytic or traditional-familial—is the one being addressed in this gender-queering. The impossibility of deciding to which authority the resistive will of the text addresses itself raises questions about the possible effects of authority imagined as multiple. How is a Lacanian law of subjectivation to account for the mechanisms of chuan zong jie dai? And how is traditional patriarchal family authority to speak about the production of the individuated subject of psychoanalysis? The effect produced might be described as a kind of layered queering: in the primary layer, both a Lacanian and a traditional-familial law are queered through the intervention of the name of the mother, while on a secondary level, each of these authoritative systems is further queered by the presence of the other.

A similarly double-interruptive reading is possible with the theme of grave-visiting. Each of the two grave-visits in the story marks a significant moment in which memory of the dead family members is reactivated and Cao-Cao comes to new realizations of her feelings toward her mother. Before visiting her mother’s grave alone, Cao-Cao visits her father’s grave with her mother, in the passage quoted above. This grave-visiting clearly gestures toward the psychoanalytic language of excavation of repressed memory and is perhaps readable as a queer rewriting of the Oedipal rule that subject formation takes place through the repression of desire for the mother and the consequent formation of the unconscious. This pattern is subverted here; Cao-Cao simultaneously excavates her repressed desire and, through this excavation, finally becomes a viable subject. But again, this is not a simple translation of psychoanalytic language, because the visiting of graves also strongly implicates the proper xiaoshun behavior of ritually attending the resting-place of dead family members. The discourse of xiao
is invoked rather directly in the scene at the father’s grave, where the mother tells the grave that Cao-Cao is not ungrateful to her father. The awkward English phrase “she’s not ungrateful to you” comes from the word gufu (to be ungrateful), a rather traditional term implying failure to acknowledge another’s kindness. In this case the mother tells the father that the daughter has acknowledged her ritual debt of filiality to him by being a good student, thus honoring his memory or ghost with respect. Cao-Cao’s mother recognizes this as one constituent of xiao. A second requirement of xiao is the act of visiting the grave itself; here Cao-Cao is brought by her mother, but it is when she accomplishes this ritual activity by herself that she finally finds resolution.

Again, the impossible question is, To which authority does the citation of the ritual of grave-visiting appeal? To that of psychoanalytic theory, in its figuration of the excavation of repressed memory, or to that of traditional familialist discourse in its figuration of the behavior as properly xiaoshun? And what happens to the convincing power of each of these modes of authority when the other intervenes?

But the transformation that occurs in the final scene at Cao-Cao’s mother’s graveside is also readable through another code that informs the text as a whole: that of Cao-Cao’s positioning between earth (di) and sky (tian) in the uneasy, floating state of ghost or angel. The text’s trajectory moves from the opening moment, in which Cao-Cao describes herself and A’Su as “angels who have lost their wings,” to the final moment beside the mother’s grave, where the angel’s wings magically manifest themselves. The opening lines of the story are as follows: “The first time I saw A’Su, I was certain that she and I were the same sort. We’re both angels who have lost our wings. Our eyes are fixed on a height attainable only in flight; our bare feet stand on the searing, obdurate earth, and yet we have lost the direction mankind ought to have.”23 Here, the wingless angel is defined by her impossible suspension between earth and sky, as her feet are painfully anchored to the earth and mankind, while her eyes are fixed on the unattainable height of the sky and angels. Cao-Cao’s figuration as inhabiting a floating non-space between these two spheres continues throughout the story, in which she is surrounded by images of spirits and demons and similar inhabitants of this in-between realm.24 Ding Naifei has argued that Taiwan’s tongzhi
fiction often invokes figures of the nonhuman, such as angels and vampires, partly because of the ways in which homosexual desire falls outside the heterosexual reproductive imperative. Thus, the humanity of homosexual subjects falls into question, and they become readable as feiren, or inhuman ghosts and spirits, “inhabiting the many narrow and perilous gaps between the world of people and the world of ghosts.”25 In Chen Xue’s story, such a reading of the narrator’s floating subjectivity draws on the traditional mythology in which the neglected dead return as ghosts (gui) from the underworld to haunt the living; the difference is that in this case the needy ghosts are invisible to the living (“in the eyes of others we were no more than smoke and dust that no-one would take notice of”) and search unseen for the thing that would allow them to find peace (in this case, wings rather than ritual offerings).26

These wings are finally found, through Cao-Cao’s speaking of her love for her mother, in the story’s final passage:

I lie before my mother’s grave as though curled in her womb, mumbling. I describe to her the feelings I’ve never revealed. It’s as painstaking as learning to speak. After all the time I have wandered and floated about, this is the first time I feel the firm solidness of the earth; at last I can distinguish my feelings for my mother.

“I love you, absolutely.”

I dimly hear A’Su’s laugh from the sky. . . . I lift my head and see the clouds gradually forming into a familiar shape, swaying back and forth, back and forth. . . .

It’s a pair of wings.27

In this passage, Cao-Cao’s relationship to earth and sky undergoes a transformation. As she speaks to her dead mother, the earth becomes solid; when she speaks of her absolute love, wings appear above her in the sky, suggesting that at last that space has become accessible to her. Where previously Cao-Cao was trapped in a floating state between earth and sky, now she simultaneously feels the newly comforting solidity of the earth and the new attainability of the sky. Although she is still figured as between earth and sky, this is now a freedom rather than a trap.

It is interesting that the language of floating between earth and sky cites
not only the idea of the restless ghost but also a traditional coding of gender in which sky (tian) refers to husbands and fathers, and earth (di) to wives and mothers, in line with the hierarchy in which tian is of primary importance and di secondary. The text’s placement of the lesbian daughter in an uneasy position between tian and di then becomes readable in gendered terms: she has an unresolved relationship not only to her father and mother, but also perhaps to gender in general. What is particularly interesting is the way in which upon resolution of her relationship to tian and di as masculine/feminine at her mother’s grave, Cao-Cao does not enact her own fixing to either term. Rather, she obtains the means to continue to travel between them, but in a new way, in which rather than being trapped in her in-between state, she gains agency and can fly at will. As she confesses her absolute love for her mother, the earth becomes solid and the wings appear. Cao-Cao finally gets tian and di straight—but probably not so terribly straight after all.

The discourse on tian/di and gender cited in the story’s final passage supplements the other discourses mentioned above. These include the one that gender-queers the traditional family structure privileging the name of the father, as well as the one that queers the psychoanalytic law which insists, first, that the sacrifice of the maternal bond is the condition of claiming a place in language and, second, that the name of the father is the threat under which this is effected. The point I am making, of course, is that the question of which of these authoritative discourses is the one to which the text finally appeals cannot be determined. The text appeals to them all and to others as well, and through this multiple and hybrid citation, it effectively destabilizes the authority and explanatory power of any single law.

Further, the text suggests a performatively constituted model of “queer writing,” effectively citing itself as example of an enactment of this new kind of power. The story is overtly about its own genesis; the plot tells how the story “Searching for the Lost Wings of the Angel” was written, which foregrounds its own construction as queer writing. The text cites itself at various points of completion. First, its manuscript appears partly written, as the first story Cao-Cao did not tear up; A’Su discovers the partly written draft and begs Cao-Cao to finish it. Toward the end of the story, the manuscript is referred to as “nearing its conclusion”; finally, it appears, completed and with the words “The End,” when Cao-Cao returns to consciousness
after what now seems to have been the extended dream of her relationship with A'Su. In this self-referential turn, the text of “Searching for the Lost Wings of the Angel” might be said to present the fact of its own completion as its final meaning, performatively constituting itself throughout its length with the implied phrase, “this story is being written.”

To illustrate a movement through the text that results in the suggestion of this enabling performative writing, I want to describe a movement between two moments in the story. These moments represent the beginning and the end of a trajectory that moves Cao-Cao from the powerlessness of unspeakability toward a recognition and deployment of the performative power of her own queer writing. The first moment is the remembered year following her father’s death and her mother’s disappearance. The second occurs toward the end of the story.

I lived in the countryside at my grandpa’s house and became a child who couldn’t speak. Facing my old grandpa, the tears trailing down his face, I couldn’t speak and I couldn’t cry.

I was so scared, terrified that as soon as I opened my mouth, this nightmare would turn...

I didn’t speak, yet day after day it became light, and everything was still real.29

I felt vaguely aware of something somewhere awaiting me, waiting for me to approach it, and then I would understand. I had been searching bitterly for many years, and my efforts had all been in vain, until A'Su appeared; her appearance was the sign guiding me. What was I searching for? What would I understand? I didn’t know.

“What we need is a pair of wings—if we found them, we could fly freely once more.”

A'Su said this at the beginning. Because of it I had written a story called “Searching for the Lost Wings of the Angel.” Now the story is nearing its end; A'Su, what about our wings?

“Cao-Cao, you just have to keep on writing, and on the paper you’ll see me, and you’ll see yourself. Everything I’ve done has been to show you this one thing.”30
The first moment presents a child’s imagined reality, in which the act of speaking magically makes things become real; refusal to speak, then, means the opposite. But Cao-Cao is betrayed by her fantasy. Events continue regardless of her wordless mutiny, and she is left powerless in the nonlinguistic space that she is now forced to occupy. The second moment suggests a reading of the story as a reclaiming of the power of speaking/writing after the first moment of nightmarish muteness. The mysterious thing for which Cao-Cao has been searching is figured as the realization that her childhood fantasy does indeed work, that effects may be produced through repetition in language. A’Su tells Cao-Cao that they both appear through Cao-Cao’s writing of them, and this is presented as the final meaning of Cao-Cao’s relationship with A’Su. The elusive lost object, then, turns out to be the enabling performative power of a specifically queer writing. Ultimately, Cao-Cao rehabs and reclaims language through queer citation of both the psychoanalytic language of subjectivation and the familial structures of xiao and jia, among others. In appropriating the strategies of citation and repetition in these ways, the story takes up the means of performatively constituted law and uses these against that normative regime in order to construct a highly unauthorized subject and writing practice. If, as I argue, the text uses the strategy of showing the multiplicity of the discourses to which its writing appeals, in order to effect the destabilization of one authoritative discourse by means of the intervention of others, then this final presentation of the meaning of the text as the fact of its own writing points to the constructive potential of such a strategy. The suggestion is that through repeated, skewed citation of the multiple, incommensurable discourses that condition the writing subject, a new and enabling position is written into being for that subject—even, perhaps, a newly queer position.

In Bodies That Matter, Butler’s project is in part to theorize a means of contestation of the social and linguistic system that determines the sexing of bodies. The system she describes insists that only bodies that correctly cite the laws of the assumption of sex will be counted as mattering, while the subjects represented in the rest are rejected and effectively become a domain of nonsubjects. This rejected domain is the constitutive outside of the domain of the subject, expelled from that allowable space at the same time that it
provides its conditions of possibility: “This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life.” This rejected domain is privileged by Butler as providing a resource that may be exploited in order to challenge the legitimacy of the law that decrees its abjection. Rather than propose a set of contestatory positions somehow magically impervious to the law of the symbolic, Butler proposes making use of the law’s excessive production of strictly “uninhabitable” (and, nevertheless, inhabited) positions: “The task will be to consider this threat and disruption [posed by the realm of rejected positions] . . . as a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility.”

Lacan claims that the law of the symbolic, through which subjects come into being, has a “semi-autonomous status” prior to being mobilized by those who become subjects through it. In order to contest this claim, Butler suggests that this symbolic law establishes its authority performatively. That is, rather than the law (which prescribes the limits of acceptable sexing) being somehow already there before sexed subjects come into being, the law is itself produced through its citation by the subjects that are also produced through it: “Although Lacan claims that the symbolic law has a semi-autonomous status prior to the assumption of sexed positions by a subject, these normative positions, i.e., the ‘sexes,’ are only known through the approximations they occasion. The force and necessity of these norms . . . is thus functionally dependent on the approximation and citation of the law; the law without its approximation is no law.”

In proposing the mobilization of the constitutive outside of the domain of the properly sexed subject as the means of contesting the authority of a symbolic law—a law that allows a disappointingly narrow range of positions for bodies if they are to matter (in effect, only one or the other of the sexes)—Butler assumes a binary system, a singular realm of “proper subjects” and its rejected outside. That is, Butler’s project, in contesting the force of the Lacanian law of the symbolic, effectively agrees with Lacan that the symbolic law is the single available law that subjects(-to-be) must cite in order to become proper subjects. In the passages cited above, the subject is
resolutely singular, and the single available domain of proper subjects con-
fronts (or fails to confront) its singularized other in the domain of rejected
nonsubjects. I suggest that Chen Xue’s text offers another means by which
the desire of such laws to appear autonomous might be contested.

“Searching for the Lost Wings of the Angel” suggests a model of con-
testation that does not operate on a binary model but, rather, invokes the mul-
tiple outsides—or locations that are ambivalently outside and inside—
which occur when systems rub up against one another. Thus Lacanian
authority is confronted with traditional family structure in which person-
hood is unthinkable should the law of xiao fail to be cited. At the same time,
discourses of xiao and jia are contested by the proximity of psychoanalytic
languages of subject-formation as well as a queer language of the daughter’s
sexual desire for her mother. Gendering in classical terms of tian and di is
confronted with a feminist gender-skewing of both the Lacanian name of
the father and the Chinese paternal-ancestral name, while restless ghosts
(gui) or wingless angels become rereadable as rejected (non)subjects. This
emphasis on the citation of multiple, apparently incommensurable laws is a
product of the multiplicity of discourses on sexuality and the subject in con-
temporary Taiwan, but it might also be seen as a general condition of subject-
formation in the postcolonial world, in which, as Homi K. Bhabha writes,
“other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange
the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition.”

While for Butler, the performative “It’s a girl!” in citing the law of sex
produces simply a category of girls/boys and a constitutive outside to that
category made up of unintelligible, non-girl/boy others, writing such as
Chen Xue’s suggests that there may be more than one way in which the girl
is a girl. The citation “girl” itself is never transparent or reliant upon a sin-
gular authority. This text suggests that the constitutive outside of a singu-
larized law of sexed positions is not the only resource available for queer
contestation. To assert that this is the only imaginable way of contesting such
laws is to assume that somehow only one authority ever oversees the
assumption of sexed positions—to deny, in other words, the simultaneous
possible presence of different laws. That the authorities cited in an utter-
ance such as “It’s a girl!” be limited to one is impossible, since every such
utterance is liable to find itself making multiple and uncontrollable “other”
citations. Under the conditions of postcoloniality the unavoidable question then becomes, in whose language, that is, under which law, is it a girl?

Finally, perhaps this writing dramatizes the action of slipping through the cracks between incommensurable discourses of subjectivation and the family, bringing each to crisis in order finally to produce a discursively imagined queer subjectivity. The story foregrounds the contestatory potential of the syncretization of discourses, enacting the strategic appropriation of the discursive tools of one system to destabilize another and to produce a liminal, shifting site for queer, where “the wrong law” can be cited in resistance to other laws, so that instead of becoming a good daughter, the protagonist becomes lesbian—or, rather, she becomes lesbian by becoming a good daughter, and vice-versa. Within this incoherent discursive space, misquotes or wrong citations begin to produce new, resistant subjectivities, analogously to the ways in which the command of the National Father may be mis-cited to incite queer political action.35 “Searching for the Lost Wings of the Angel” suggests a specific queer performativity for which the act of this multiple-writing—this writing which is compelled to cite not one but many laws—describes an inhabitable queer subject position. Queer is then figured as that which moves between and on the borders of discursive systems, continually interrupting each by means of the other, between and within discourses of psychoanalysis and traditional family, lesbian identity and daughterhood. While the incommensurability of the systems is emphasized, so is the impossible command to occupy all systems simultaneously. Paradoxically, it is out of the impossible multiple-interpellation figured in Chen Xue’s story that a new, borderland queer position is written into being.

It might be hoped that attention to the ways in which queer works differently in “other” places, such as Taiwan, could both displace and broaden the term itself as it circulates in the contexts in which it originated. The writing of queer by Chen Xue’s text as paradigmatically dynamic and liminal, not through aesthetic choice but due to the inescapable command to occupy multiple contradictory positions simultaneously, might suggest productive directions for queer in the postcolonial world. What is dramatized in this writing of queer is perhaps also what has been described as an “existence... marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of the
Queer might then be thought of as happening in the difficult transit in-between systems and languages, where survival hinges on abandoning nostalgia for the "pure" culture. Again, discursive syncretism is not chosen by this construction of queer; rather, the productivity of queer lies in its exploitation of these inescapable interruptions, in order to imagine subject-positions that thrive on such motion and multiplicity. Elspeth Probyn writes of "the positivity of desire as it produces new relations and relationships among individuals, things, groups, etc.—a current that short-circuits the categorical order of things." Produced largely in Euro-American contexts, it can be argued that queer itself inevitably tends to suppose a certain categorical order of things arising from the dominant epistemologies of those traditions. That order is what gets short-circuited in writings such as Chen Xue's, not only because of the different epistemologies suggested by the writing, but more importantly because of the vision offered of queer itself as citational and syncretic, in motion across these borderlines, a vision that, among other effects, dis-places queer as always only a product of the West.

Notes

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1 Sedgwick argues that 'queer' can refer to the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Tendencies [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993], 8; emphasis in original).

2 For detailed discussions of this kinship system, see, for example, Maurice Freedman, "Ritual Aspects of Chinese Kinship and Marriage," in Family and Kinship in Chinese Society, ed. Maurice Freedman (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1970); Myron L. Cohen, House United, House Divided: The Chinese Family in Taiwan (New York: Columbia University Press,
Ocko observes that while xiao is never precisely defined in the late Qing legal code, bu xiao (unfiliality) is one of the Ten Abominations and was punishable in most cases with death (Johnathan K. Ocko, “Hierarchy and Harmony: Family Conflict as Seen in Ch’ing Legal Cases,” in Orthodoxy in Late Imperial China, ed. Kwang-Ching Liu [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978], 215). Zito provides a crucial discussion of xiao as descriptive of all social relations through her examination of the specific power of the roles of grandfather, father, and son in the performance of ritual sacrifice (Angela Zito, “City Gods, Filiality, and Hegemony in Late Imperial China,” Modern China 13 [July 1987]: 333–371).

Huang Yu-Xiu, “A Social Analysis on the Priority of the Father’s/Husband’s Right,” Funü Xinshi [Awakening], no. 146 (July 1994): 4–6. She cites, among others, articles which specify that the wife and children shall live in the home of the father/husband, that the financial assets of the husband and wife shall be managed by the husband and that he shall receive the interest from them, that children shall take the father’s surname, and that in the case of divorce the guardianship of the children shall be the responsibility of the father.


Robert Eno cites the Xunzi’s vision in which the “human” element of the person is formed through socialization into groups based on the appropriate allotment of roles. The ability to take on these social roles is then what distinguishes “human” from “beast,” or infant. Importantly, the family is the context for personal humanization; glossing the Chung-yung, Eno writes that “failure to master the role of child means failure to master the capacity for fulfilling social roles. The unfilial person is not a person at all” (Robert Eno, The Confucian Creation of Heaven: Philosophy and the Defense of Ritual Mastery [New York: SUNY Press, 1990], 73; emphasis added).

See also Hans Huang, “Be(com)ing Gay: Sexual Dissidence and Cultural Change in Contemporary Taiwan” (M.A. thesis, University of Sussex, 1996). Huang argues for the homophobic force of the reproductive imperative of the traditional “Confucian” family, emphasizing the homophobia of the neo-Confucian privileging of the reproductive patrilineal family that leads to a historically grounded and specifically “local” form of homosexual abjection.


Ibid., 13.


As though to make this point, *tongzhi*, which began circulating in Taiwan in the early 1990s and has since become the most common term in Taiwan for something like lesbian/gay, itself operates as a citation. Etymologically meaning *same-will*, *tongzhi* is the common translation of *comrade* as in both CCP and KMT liberationist nationalist rhetoric, appropriated to mean something like *queer* partly because its first character is also the first of *tongxue*, homosexual(ity). *Tongzhi* is thus readable as a cheeky citation of Chairman Mao and also the “National Father” (*Guofu*) of the Republic of China, Sun Yat-Sen, whose famous utterance “The revolution has not yet been successful; comrades we must struggle yet” has been appropriated for lesbian/gay political struggles. For example, see Ni Jia-Zhen, “Homosexuality Theory and Activism’s Agency on 1990s Taiwan,” in *Visionary Essays in Sexuality/Gender Studies: Proceedings of the First International Conference on Sexuality Education, Sexology, Gender and LesBiGay Studies*, vol. 1, ed. He Chun-Rui (Taipei: Metamedia, 1997); see also “Comrades We Must Struggle Yet,” *Eslite Review of Books* Editorial Department, 13–25 September 1994, special issue on *tongxue* culture, 22.

Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context,” 185; emphasis added.


Ding Naifei, “Very Close to *Yinfu* and *Enü*: Or, How to Read the *Jin Ping Mei* (1695) and *Enü Shu* (1995),” *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly*, no. 303 (August 1997): 62. Ding also suggests a parallel between Chen Xue’s *enü* and the Ming category of *feinü*, or “non-women,” categorized as such for their inability to bear children. See also Keith McMahon, *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists: Sexuality and Male-Female Relations in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Fiction* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995). McMahon characterizes the warning descriptions of *enü* in the sex treatises of this period: “They have ugly and inauspicious features that cause men harm—for example, coarse skin, masculine voice, large mouth, coarse and long pubic hairs, malodourous underarms, inability to have orgasm, excess sexual waters, and coldness of the vagina—many of which appear as negative signs in later literature and folk wisdom as well” (44).

*Enü Shu* was published as part of Huangguan’s *xin ganguan xiaoshuo* (new sensual fiction) series, in which other publications were also by young “queer” writers, such as Davy Chi (Ji Dawei) and Lucifer Hong (Hong Ling).

Yang Zhao’s preface to Chen Xue, *Enü Shu*, 16.


*Isle Margin* 14 (September 1995), includes a section on *xie guozu* as “queer nation.”

Chen Xue, *Enü Shu*, 43–44.

Ibid., 52.

Ibid., 20.
For example, A'Su is figured from the start as “spirit-woman” (ibid., 21: “her finger was like a spirit-woman’s wand”); Cao-Cao imagines her writing talent “wearing the mask of a demon” (ibid., 26); she describes herself as a “homeless spirit . . . like a ghost” (ibid., 34); she dreams of herself and A'Su floating in space where they appear “like smoke and dust” (ibid., 47).


Chen Xue, Enü Shu, 47.

Ibid., 52.

My thanks to those graduate students in National Taiwan Central University’s English department who made this point in our discussion of Chen Xue’s story in January 1998.

Chen Xue, Enü Shu, 33–34.

Ibid., 46.

Butler, Bodies That Matter, 3.

Ibid.

Ibid., 14; emphasis in original.

Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994), 114.

See n. 12.

Bhabha, Location of Culture, 1.

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