Between

The Public Dimension of Homosexual(S) Dwelling in the Sinosphere: Parks in Pai Hsien-Yung's *Crystal Boys* And Mu Cao's Poems

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Abstract

The experience of the public dimension of dwelling varies considerably according to the different positions of individuals in the social space in which it takes place. This essay is interested in investigating how literature, as a form of social critique and analysis, can explore this side of the public dimension of dwelling, focusing on the representation of parks as places of homosexual dwelling in the works of Pai Hsien-yung and Mu Cao. After examining the implications of social space for the dynamics of dwelling in the city, with a focus on unequal relations of class and sexuality, the essay maintains the focus on space by discussing the role of literature as a representational space, before moving on to a close reading of the texts under consideration in order to analyze how parks are approached in terms of dwelling for stigmatized homosexual men and how their public dimension is questioned and reassessed. The essay concludes that the experience of the public dimension of dwelling is inseparable from the modalities of its interaction with the larger social space of which it is a part.

Keywords

Social space, Parks, LGBT+, Chinese literature, Taiwanese literature, Pai Hsien-yung, Mu Cao.

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Introduction

How can literature contribute to our understanding of the public dimension of dwelling? And how can the concept of dwelling, taken in its public (and therefore social) aspect, increase our comprehension of how living in the city is portrayed in literary texts? After all, literature can be motivated by a desire to grasp the world, but it can also bring to light lives or situations otherwise confined to the dark corners of history and create narratives that question our perception of what goes on in specific spaces. And while our experience of private spaces is by definition our own, a form of art that reflects on the imbrications of dwelling and public spaces, and how personal experiences interact with social conditions, becomes particularly poignant for a critical assessment of societal conditions and norms.

In this essay, I will explore these issues by examining a very specific modality of the public dimension of dwelling in a likewise specific brand of literature. To be more precise, I will examine how parks are approached, «with all the partiality of the imagination» (Barchelard 1994: xxxvi), as spaces of dwelling for homosexual men and men who have sex with men in the works by Pai Hsien-yung and Mu Cao, authors respectively from Taiwan and mainland China, two territories of the Sinosphere, i.e. the Chinese-speaking area. It is known that parks carry a special significance in many LGBT+ cultures around the world as cruising spots where (homo) sexuality could or can be practiced or explored, especially in times or places of repression and oppression. Yet can they be spaces of actual 'dwelling'? Pai Hsien-yung and Mu Cao offer compelling answers to this question, and while their works are interesting per se as important representations of ho-

mosexual lives in the Sinosphere, they may also have a broader theoretical validity in unearthing the ways in which the public dimension of dwelling is experienced according to social hierarchies.

The essay opens with a discussion on the specificities of the public dimension of dwelling in cities, understanding them as social spaces. It then examines the various forms of urban dwelling on the part of male homosexuals in Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC) and how they are determined by class conditions. Finally, it carries out a close reading of Pai Hsien-yung's and Mu Cao's texts to get to the core of the argument and put the hypothesis briefly outlined here to the test. What I'm aiming to do here is unpacking how literature can become an instrument to represent, analyze, and critique the social dynamics that affect the public dimension of dwelling.

Urban hierarchies, dwelling, and literature

Cities are social spaces par excellence. Lefebvre observes that social space is 'social' precisely because it is produced by «the forces of production and with the relations of production» (1991: 210). In this sense, social space is not exactly mimetic with physical space: a physical space may be an area, a neighborhood, a city, crossed by multiple social spaces according to the social identity of its actors. Lefebvre continues by specifying that «[w]e are confronted not by one social space but by many – indeed, by an unlimited multiplicity or uncountable set of social spaces[.] Social spaces interpenetrate one another and/or superimpose themselves upon one another» (86). In this sense, each city is itself a complex social space, made up of a plurality of lower social spaces. Driven by the organization of the forces and relations of production, social spaces reveal dynamics of class, but also the arrays of social, familial, cultural, religious, ethnic differences that together account for the city's internal diversity. The way cities attempt to organize such diversity is a thermometer of existing class and power (im) balances, reflecting systemic conditions and producing spatial divisions in the urban geography. These divisions have a clear impact on how urban dwellers access and 'dwell' publicly in the city. For instance, processes such as gentrification heavily affect the «spatial agency» of individuals from different social and economic background (Kukla 2021), while urban governance plans to police cities into uniformity generally turn them into spaces for middle-class consumption and entertainment by expelling the downtrodden, something which is particularly evident in present-day China (Morris 2022).

The conditions of living in the social spaces that are constitutive of the macro-social space of the city influence subjects' perception of the urban reality. To quote Young (2012: 238), «dwelling situates one's own identity and activity in relation to a horizon of a vast variety of other activity, and the awareness that this unknown, unfamiliar activity affects the conditions of one's own». In this sense, the public dimension of dwelling is based on different gradations of accessibility to different places and activities, that depend on the material and ideological organization of the social space. Notably Massey (1991: 179) has investigated how public spaces are permeated by gender roles and ideologies, observing that they «are not only gendered, but, in their being so, both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood». We may elaborate on this remark suggesting that something that distinguishes the spaces of public dwelling from those of private dwelling is precisely the fact that the former makes these dynamics of exclusion visible. Even though they are often ignored or separated, these dynamics are objectively there for everyone to see. Public space is where systems of oppression unravel publicly, as discussed, for instance, by Sue (2010; see also Zhang *et al.* 2022). The existence of these oppressions calls for, as Hanhardt remarks, a «critical analysis of a politics of the city [that] asks to whom the city belongs» (2013: 10).

Against this complex backdrop, literature can play a role in developing this critical analysis, which also concerns who is entitled to speak (and write) for the city. As a distinct form of cultural expression and subjective representation often deeply engaged with the real, city-focused literature entertains a close relationship with the objective, material urban space, and more specifically with the public spaces of dwelling. The discipline of literary urban studies, for example, is concerned with «conceptualizing the relation between the textual and the material city» by engaging with non-literary or extra-textual activities, such as «the theory and practice of planning or […] economics, mobility science, or the social sciences» (Gurr 2021: 3). This approach, and more generally any analysis targeting the ways the material city enters and structures its textual representation, interacts with Lefebvre's concept of the representational space. As opposed to spatial practice (the ways spaces are lived) and representations of space (how spaces are imagined by their designers, such as architects or planners), the representational space concerns «complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not», and, precisely in referring to the way spaces are experienced and represented, it involves the arts (Lefebvre 1991: 33). In my understanding, the representational space created by

literature can address the public dimension of dwelling, precisely because it makes «symbolic uses of [the physical space's] objects» to «change and appropriate» space itself. That is particularly true for any individual's effort to come to terms with their own personal experiences of dwelling in public, which are in turn influenced by their social being, like their class, gender identity, sexual orientation, and so on. Through this active interaction with the material space, literature performs a socio-political role in venturing into dynamics that would otherwise remain obscured, thus enriching our understanding of the various dimensions of public dwelling beyond what is superficially visible. China makes for a particularly interesting case in this respect. The urbanization of China's society in the last forty years since the beginning of market reforms in the late 1970s, which now sees over 60% of the population living in cities, has also urbanized its literature[1]. However, studies on Chinese urban literature have not yet addressed it from the perspective of the public dimension of dwelling.

The public dimension of homosexual dwelling in the Sinosphere city

As it was mentioned in the introduction, examining the literary representation of lower-class homosexual men's relation to the dimension of public dwelling is a useful case to demonstrate how the experience of the latter changes significantly according to the factors that constitute the social space. In this context, it is particularly evident that it is necessary to speak of plural identities when it comes to men attracted to men, given the many elements that cut across each individual experience of homosexuality, class above all, which in turn affect one's relationship to public dwelling. Bao (2011) puts forward a distinction between the stigmatized, lower-class 'homosexual' subject; the middle-class 'gay' subject who seeks after a middle-class lifestyle; and the 'queer' subject, more transnational in their mobility and knowledge[2]. This differentiation also results in differentiated degrees of access to different urban spaces: cruising grounds (generally parks), activist centers, "friendly" commercial venues, gay clubs and bars. All this in a context where LGBT+ people have suffered heavy

[1] Cfr. Visser and Lu 2016.

[2] I will not necessarily follow Bao's terminology in this essay, using 'homosexual', 'gay', and 'queer' in their more general sense.

forms of oppression, greatly relaxed in Taiwan, still relevant in the PRC (Bao 2018a).

It is undeniable that possibilities for gay dwelling have significantly improved in the Sinosphere. Taiwan has legalized same-sex marriage and adopted anti-discrimination laws. Better conditions and venues for LGBT+ sociality exist in the PRC's major cities, despite the persisting political and cultural obstacles (Bao 2018a). However, the city appears predominantly as an exclusionary «space for middle-class gay consumption» (Liu 2015: 11). Urban middle-class gays' identity is based upon an «imagined cosmopolitanism» (Bao 2018a: 49) made possible by the proximity to the expat community. It's evident that the precondition for this kind of enjoyment is class privilege: within the social space of the city, these venues, while undoubtedly public forms of dwelling, have economic and cultural costs that exclude lower-class homosexual men. This is but one element that shows that the experience of homosexual life in China is differentiated along class lines, whereby those from poorer backgrounds, mostly being rural migrants, remain stigmatized even within the "gay community" (Zheng 2015: 10). Class lines, then, also differentiate the dimensions of public dwelling accessible to homosexuals within a certain social space. As a result, parks have been and remain meaningful not only in their significance for queer culture, but also as an active dimension of (gendered) public dwelling (Allen 2007).

In many areas of the world, parks have become part of a «public realm» of active sexuality for gay men, opposed to a de-eroticized «realm of undifferentiated domesticity» (Reed 1996: 69). As spaces for homoeroticism and sexuality, they are public inasmuch as they are open-air locations, but as specific micro-social spaces they are generally cut off from the rest of the city's macro-social space, known only to a niche of individuals often brought together by the same sexual tastes, as well as to government and police authorities. Historically, they have performed the function of what Goffman (1959) calls the «back space», namely where stigmatized individuals (homosexuals, in this case) can stand exposed without concealing their stigma. In the Sinosphere, and especially mainland China, parks are an example of interwoven practices of tradition and modernity, where the effort to maintain a sort of traditional "Chinese" quality intersects the adoption of styles and functionalities influenced by globalization(s)[3]. In terms of cultural history, gardens have been associated with femininity

[3] See Padua 2020

and women-assigned gender roles in classical literature[4], the most striking example of it being the 18th-century novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, where the protagonist Jia Baoyu's unwillingness to leave the garden signals his refusal to conform to social expectations by way of an allegorical emasculation. But these were places of private dwelling after all, although the complex social relations of wealthy manors (including the rich human ecology that populated their gardens) would have us rethink what we mean by *private*[5]. Padua (2020) explains how public parks really became a thing only in the 20th century. We might add, not without a purposeful sarcastic twist, that the appearance of gay cruising areas in parks was a further example of conformity to modernity and globality, although probably not quite what state authorities and urban planners had in mind.

Far away from the lights of bars and the "friendliness" of certain commercial establishments, parks in the Sinosphere have become Goffman's back spaces on the one hand, but they also replicate social divisions with the "gay community" on the other. Working-class or poor homosexual men have often acted as prostitutes, while wealthier visitors (who do not necessarily are or identify as gay) go there to enjoy their services (Zheng 2015: 100). In some way, while the latter are just visitors, or users, the former are what we might fully consider as the *dwellers* of such spaces. But parks are not safe spaces. They have been associated with insecurity (*ibid.*: 9), especially connected to the raids that tormented park goers until the early 2010s (*ibid.*: 134). Police harassment occurred in both the PRC and Taiwan[6], and despite having relaxed in recent decades, forms of more subtle self-discipline are still in place, such as the habit of keeping a low profile, adaptation to normative behaviors, and stigmatization of non-conforming attitudes[7]. These facts once again compel us to rethink to what extent these locations are really 'public' also in the sense of visible, or whether they are still invisibilized by the dominant moral ideology.

Here we see, then, that while the concept of social space refers to the web of social relations that characterize a certain space, places may likewise be understood as the specific knots where these unequal relations take up form and crystallize. Such form can be physical, even architectural, but also just the specific modality through which these relations articulate

[4] See Wang 2023

[5] See Scott 1986.

[6] See Sanders 2014.

[7] See, among others, Qian 2017.

in localized areas and forms. The following case studies are going to flesh out how these social hierarchies shaping up the mode of public dwelling in parks frequented by homosexual men or men who have sex with men in the Sinosphere are represented in the literary dimension.

Pai Hsien-yung

Pai Hsien-yung (Bai Xianyong in pinyin transliteration; b. 1937) is a writer originally born in mainland China, before following his Nationalist father to Taiwan after the Communist takeover in 1949. He is a well-established name in Taiwanese literature, appreciated for his rich and varied literary record, dealing with questions of identity, rootlessness, displacement, and sexuality[8]. His gay-themed masterpiece is the 1983 novel, *Crystal Boys* (*Niezi*). Extremely significant for what concerns gay history and identity in Taiwan[9], the novel follows a group of young men 'exiled' to Taipei's New Park for their homosexuality. There, they form an informal community that dwells in the night and allows them to express their sexuality, while at the same time finding new affective ties. As observed by Shi, the novel's canonical status can be attributed to the fact that «stories about a homosexual community are told for the first time» (Shi 2017: 136) – or, we might say, about a public experience of gay dwelling.

As a matter of fact, in the opening chapters of the novel, the public space of the park is strongly asserted:

> There are no days in our kingdom, only nights. As soon as the sun comes up, our kingdom goes into hiding, for it is an unlawful nation; we have no government and no constitution, we are neither recognized nor respected by anyone, our citizenry is little more than rabble. Sometimes we have a leader —a person who's been around for a while, someone who's good-looking, impressive, popular. But we have no qualms about dethroning him any time we feel like it, because we are a fickle, unruly people. The area between our borders is pitifully small, no more than two or three hundred meters long by a hundred meters wide – that narrow strip of land surrounding the oval lotus pond in Taipei's New Park, on Guanqian Street. The fringes of our territory are planted with all sorts of tropical trees: green coral, breadfruit, palms so old their drooping fronds nearly touch the

[8] Lin 2018.

[9] Guo 2011.

> ground, and, of course, the stand of old coconut trees alongside the road that wave their heads in exasperation the day long. It's as though our kingdom were surrounded and hidden by a tightly woven fence – cut off from the outside world, isolated for the time being. But we are always keenly aware of the constant threat to our existence by the boundless world on the other side of the fence. (Pai 1995)

Men there engage in prostitution to earn a living. For the most part of the novel, this informal sex industry appears as the only one available to individuals who manifest and avow their homosexual identity (which, pace the talk about its alleged emancipatory potential, shows prostitution as the product of specific social conditions hardly reducible to "free choice"). One of them is Ah Qing, the narrator, expelled from high school after a relation with a middle-aged janitor, and rejected by his own family. He carries stigma with him, just like the other characters, who, regardless of their background, are now pushed to the fringes of society and the city's subaltern classes, even a sort of *Lumpenproletariat*. Such stigma is precisely the element that allows "crystal boys" to group together and forge new relations, somewhat oscillating between mutual aid, or even solidarity, and the reproduction of power asymmetries. Aid includes emotional support and financial assistance, with the boys borrowing money from Chief Yang, the pimp. He is also the starkest manifestation of the mentioned asymmetries: despite the narrating voice describing it as a place with no distinctions of rank, the park is also a social space with its own hierarchy.

In fact, the park is presented as ambivalent. Manager Yan, a "customer", is given the narrative role of suggesting precisely the long-term negative consequence of *dwelling* in the park, as he tells Ah Qing that «the longer you hang around the park, the harder it's going to be to ever find your way out» (*ibid.*). At the same time, the social space of the city inevitably pushes the boys back to the park, «for this little strip of territory, protected by the darkness, held out at least a sliver of hope» (*ibid.*). In other words, dwelling in the public dimension of the park, populated by people who share «bodies filled with aching, irrepressible desire and hearts filled with insane loneliness» (*ibid.*), is much more desirable and practically possible.

In fact, in *Crystal Boys*, dwelling in public takes on its most literal sense: having lost their home due to the stigma befallen upon their sexual orientation, they now have to dwell in a public community and the park provides the right opportunity to do so. Shi's observation that the dimen-

sion of the park «sets physical and affective boundaries for a shared community/identity» (2017: 143) is particularly validated by the scene where, after a devastating typhoon has passed, the boys go back to the park. The description of the scene powerfully conveys this sense of community:

> […] all the birds of youth had flown back to the park, like bats that had been hiding from a storm in strange caves. Now, under the cover of darkness, they winged their way back to their own caves. We huddled together to get warm and to talk, relating all sorts of gossip. (*Ibid.*)

Since it happens in a public dimension, and therefore within all the imbrications of the social space, dwelling here has a cost. Firstly, it comes at the expense of memory: the possibility to establish the New Park "kingdom" is based upon the erasure of the past:

> The one thing we denizens of the park never talk about is our own family backgrounds. And even if we do, we don't say much, since every one of us has his own private anguish that can never be told to anyone. (*Ibid.*)

This oblivion only reiterates the social cause of crystal boys' expulsion from their families and the reason why they came together to dwell in the park. In this public dimension, however, each individual story is kept *private*, diluted – or coagulated – in a collective consciousness. But this dwelling comes also accompanied by a form of exclusion: the public dimension of the park is restricted to crystal boys (and their clients), as shown in the scene where one of them angrily lashes out at a heterosexual couple caught flirting near the lotus pond. Finally, it is by no means a safe dwelling, as it doesn't happen in a space separate from the city's social and legal order, where homosexuality and prostitution are persecuted. Police raids are frequent, and the final one is described as an invasion and an intrusion into the secluded space:

> a police whistle suddenly rent the darkness and seven or eight flashlights lit up the area like bolts of lightning and shone directly on us. The sound of running boots on the cement steps; a dozen shouting policemen with night sticks in their hands surrounding us. Not a single one of us got away that night. We were all handcuffed as we fell into their net. (*Ibid.*)

Later in the novel, the dark kingdom is abandoned as Chief Yang and his boys open a bar and establish there their new "nest". Moving into a more visible space, abandoning prostitution for a respectable activity, they seem to have left the park behind for good. However, Ah Qing eventually resolves to go back there. While the bar is constantly described as a new and safer nest, the park maintains a force of attraction. The warm welcome back of the park to Ah Qing is personified by the old and sympathetic guardian, Old Guo:

> «… this old nest of ours is still here, just waiting for the tired birds to come home to roost, to rest. Risks are hard to avoid, curfews and things like that, but all you have to do is put up with the rain until the blue skies return. Go on in, Little Hawk, they're all there around the lotus pond». There was a kindly smile on his face as he waved me in. (*Ibid.*)

The guardian's words echo those spoken much earlier in the novel by older park dwellers, who had told the boys that their curiosity for the «great big world out there» would be disappointed and they would end up going back to the park (*ibid.*). These words may be read as a critical or cynical awareness of the exclusionary gender norms existing in society. *Crystal Boys*, then, convincingly reveals the park as a concrete back space where a possibility of dwelling materializes for the boys who are expelled from the oppressive Taiwanese society of the time. At the same time, the park being a public space, this dwelling also occurs in a public dimension, which means it is also subject to the norms of the city's social space, particularly in the form of the oppression of homosexuals through police raids and the exploitation of gay men themselves as prostitutes.

Mu Cao

Mu Cao (b. 1974) is quite different from Pai Hsien-yung in terms of background and style. He was born Su Xianghui in rural Henan in 1974. Like many other young Chinese from the countryside, he moved to cities in search for work and settled in Beijing. Throughout the many years of his mobility, he did several jobs, but he also started writing poetry, adopting the pen-name Mu Cao, literally "grass on the grave", which seems intentionally aimed at unsettling traditional Chinese culture's predilection for auspiciousness (Bao 2018b: 187). Given this context, his poetry may fall under several classifications used in literary criticism, like *diceng* (lower-stra-

ta), *caogen* (grassroots), or *dagong* (migrant worker), although Mu Cao hardly finds a place in academic discussions and literary taxonomies. He is sometimes promoted as a gay poet (*tongzhi shiren*) and appreciated for his transgressive style (van Crevel 2020: 278-279), which is paradoxically also what keeps him outside other literary venues, since the focus on his transgression possibly overwhelms the reception of his poetry. For instance, the opening lines of his *Selected Poems* (the cover of which, not incidentally, displays an erotic scene of naked men), the critic Yang Chunguang (2009: 2) writes that Mu Cao's poetry «begins with sexual perversion, sexual abuse and sex incest» to expose society's «moral crisis, ethical crisis and spiritual crisis». While all these elements are undoubtedly there, and unapologetically so (as I will elaborate shortly), focusing on them exclusively risks reifying and commodifying transgression, defusing its radical potential. In fact, Mu Cao's poetic work centers class as well, using corporeality and sexual images to critique the harsh working conditions migrant laborers like him are frequently subject to (Bao 2018b).

These two traits of Mu Cao's social identity and poetic aesthetics cannot be separated. Instead, they add up in influencing his rereading of the urban environment, offering poignant insights on how class background crucially affects the way(s) homosexuals live, experience, and represent the city's social space(s). As already mentioned, Mu Cao's poetry is very graphic, it includes crude scenes of sex and sexual abuse where the act of intercourse or the images of genitalia variously turn into metaphors of power, money, inequality, or even liberation. In several poems he observes the phallic forms of buildings or imagines passers-by and co-workers to be naked all at once, superimposing homoerotic visions upon the ordinary. While this interesting strategy would require a larger discussion of its own, here I will rather focus on the fruitful encounter between Mu Cao's poetry and cruising parks. To connect with our previous discussion about Pai Hsien-yung, we might even go as far as saying that Mu Cao appears as a real-life, poetry-writing Ah Qing, whose poetic dwelling in the public social space of the park highlights how lower-class homosexuals experience public dwelling.

The first poem we are going to examine is "Xihaizi Park" (Xihaizi gongyuan):

> in China, where a park isthere will always be the steps of homosexuals
> this is a very small park in a county town
> without any flowers, just stones and trees
> I've heard that they're all thirsty, those from here

not far from the public toilet
strolling watching sighing melancholic
staring self-deprecating letting off lonely
I'm just like you, I'm just like him
you and him, just like me, have been discarded by life

in China, where there's a dark corner
there always will be the moaning of the vulnerable (Mu 2009: 136)[10]

Here, action is firmly located within the separate space of the park. The poem displays a circular structure, i.e. it starts and ends almost with the same lines, which are there to reiterate the inextricable link between the park and homosexuals. This circularity also encloses the text in architectural terms, making if formally self-sufficient, reminding of how the parks itself appears (but only appears, as we have seen) a space closed off from its surroundings, with its own particular dynamics: in a way, the poem is the park, much like the park is in the poem. In fact, not much is told about the actual geography of the park itself, but it does not really matter. The park here is not only a physical space, but the epitome of its homosexual walkers' mood. The barren landscape of trees and stones with no flowers seem to emphasize the lack of beauty in life. The verbs and adjectives of the second stanza, separated by blank spots, themselves look like lonely strollers in the space of the poem, graphically remindful of the lonely subjects the poem is talking about (referenced to in a verse, quite off note, with the quasi-sociological term *ruoshi renqun*, vulnerable group).

While this poem is more metaphorical and sensorial, "Mr. Zhu Xing Waited for Me at Nanlishi Road Park" offers another kind of representation, focused on the actual act.

the first time I went to Nanlishi Road Park
I happened to meet Mr. Zhu Xing
he led me into three toilets
where people went in and out embarrassed, I got hard (*Ibid.*: 139)

Here we have a lyrical I, which might as well personify Mu Cao himself, or encompass any reader who has visited or fantasized about cruising in parks. The following four stanzas, all made up of three lines each, see the constant repetition of the appointment. The first line, «Mr. Zhu Xing made

[10] All translations of Mu Cao's poems are mine.

a date with me at Nanlishi Road Park», maintains the geographic location of the encounter; the second line, «I went there on bus no. 728», describes the practical action of getting there, with the reader's gaze invariably located in the park. The third line changes with each stanza, signaling a qualitative improvement in the relationship: «Mr Zhu Xing led me to a public bath» (casual sex), «took me to eat roast duck» (proper date), «took me to buy Pai Hsien-yung's *Crystal Boys*» (sharing extra-sexual interests but also establishing an intertextual connection). In the last stanza, the lyrical I goes back to the park in his dreams, imagining Zhu Xing waiting for him "in the cold wind, like a father", suggesting complex psychological implications and culminating the imbalance of authority in the relationship that was already hinted at in the previous stanzas. In passing, the reference to *Crystal Boys* (besides being surprisingly apt for this essay), just like that to Lan Yu, the main character of the Chinese gay literature classic *Beijing Story*, in another poem, suggest shared cultural references among gay writers in the Sinosphere (space constraints force me to refer to Liu 2015 for a more detailed discussion).

How are these poems about *dwelling* and how are they addressing its public dimension? More abstract, "Xihaizi Park" constructs a place that is seemingly atemporal – it's just there, in a cyclical repetition (just like the poem itself is circular). Here, dwelling takes a more sensorial dimension, the park/poem being populated only by shadows, sensations, and sounds. "Mr. Zhu Xing" is more concrete, we see people going in and out, and of course we have the figure of Zhu Xing himself. The park, here, becomes a meeting point that produces something else, namely romance. In both cases, the public dimension is highlighted: while it is quite clear in the former poem, it is also constantly present in the latter, where the private relationship grows from a public venue (the toilet, where the narrator had an erection and was embarrassed, presumably because someone might see it) and constantly returns to the park, the space where their relationship dwells (not incidentally, they never really go home). It is also relevant to point out that both poems narrow down on to the specific place where the action happens, i.e. the *public* toilet.

Perhaps most importantly, dwelling in the park takes a public dimension especially in its collective nature. We have already seen how "Xihaizi Park" portrays a commonality of feelings and sensations that brings the narrating voice to recognize that all the people wandering and moaning in the dark share the same condition: "you and him, just like me, have been discarded by life". This sensation only partly contradicts the loneliness expressed in another line of the poem, suggesting a common dimen-

sion of dwelling that, however, may not be strong enough to overcome the negative feelings of separation produced by non-conformity to social norms, which is ultimately, like in Pai Hsien-yung, a sign of internalized abjection. Not incidentally, a passage from *Crystal Boys* emphasizes that what Taipei's New Park dwellers had in common were also «hearts filled with insane loneliness» (Pai 1995). And remindful of Pai's dark kingdom is another poem by Mu Cao, "Be a Bit Cheaper and You Won't Be Hungry":

> I don't know his true name
> he's called Xiao [Young] Wei around here
> I call him Xiao Wei too
> he comes from Sichuan
> he's just sixteen
> he's been away from home for two years
> just like us
> he comes from a cold and broken home
> […]
> the charming lamps in the park are on
> beggar children continue to beg
> flower-selling children continue to sell flowers
> rag-picking children continue to pick up rags
> child prostitutes continue to prostitute themselves
> child thieves continue to steal…
> we are all orphan boys
> we live in the dirt
> we cannot step out of the dark night of life
> we desire a warm home… (Mu Cao 2009: 166-169)

What is particularly compelling about this poem is the double (and contradictory) meaning it assigns to the public park dimension of gay dwelling in the city. On the one hand, we find again the traits of darkness, unsettling sexual charm, and abandonment that characterize cruising parks in Mu Cao's other poems, as well as in *Crystal Boys*. The narrating voice here is not a spectator, but is among the people of the park, observing the newcomer. The public, communal dimension is made explicit here by the gallery of children presented in the second part. It is strongly implied that they all share being abandoned by their families and they find an implicit form of life-in-common, if not solidarity, by getting together in the park (by the way, nowhere is it explicitly stated that they are gay, if not for the homosexual relations implied by the fact that they are prostitutes). The ambiguity already suggested by Pai Hsien-yung is reinforced here by the

statement that «we cannot step out of the dark night of life», conveying a feeling of resignation, rather than of happiness; and the dark night, so far associated to park dwelling, is used to describe life, thus suggesting that the boys of the poem are confined to a restricted, ultimately oppressive horizon. Thus, ultimately, the public dimension, while not emancipatory, creates a condition for developing a community of mutual aid and support, but remains oppressive in the fact that it is not immune from the dominant relations of the city's social space, confining homeless boys to poor conditions, especially prostitution.

Conclusion

The discussion above may supply some answers to questions posed in the introduction. The perspective of dwelling has proven most useful to explore social spaces from the literary viewpoint of those who inhabit them, according to the inequal relations that shape them. At the same time, a literary investigation provides a window into the emotional and sensorial, in addition to social and communal factors that create very different and localized experiences of dwelling. In the specific case of homosexuals dwelling in the social space of the Sinosphere city, it counters the cultural hegemony of the middle-class, cosmopolitan representational space. This also compels us to rethink what we mean by *public dimension*: the authors surveyed above amply show that parks, while being definitely public spaces, are characterized as a dimension that does not seem public at all, as soon as its dwellers conjure up the dark kingdom, confined and otherized as it appears; at the same time, it remains public, given how dwellers are exposed to sexualization, especially as prostitutes, or repression. What it shows is that there exists not just one public dimension of dwelling, even in a single place, but multiple ones, ultimately based on the web of unequal relations of a social space.

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