Cui Zi'en on Queer Literature: A Conversation

Hongwei Bao and Cui Zi'en

Cui Zi'en is one of the best-known queer writers, filmmakers and activists from the PRC. Born in Harbin in 1958, Cui received a master's degree in literature from the Graduate School of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. He worked as a screenwriter at Beijing Youth Studio and later an associate professor at the Department of Film Studies at Beijing Film Academy. His literary works are fine examples of avant-garde Chinese literature, and his films have heralded queer Chinese cinema. An early organiser of the Beijing Queer Film Festival, Cui is also a pioneer of China's queer social movement. Cui's literary works include *Peach-Coloured Lips*, *Enter the Clowns*, *Bed of Roses*, and *Pseudo-Science Fiction Stories*. His short story collection, *Platinum Bible of the Public Toilet* was published in English by Duke University Press in 2024. In this conversation with scholar and writer Hongwei Bao that took place in February 2020, Cui talks about his career as a queer writer and his literary works. [1]

BAO: When did you start writing?

CUI: Simply put, I call the time I prepared myself for writing the classical age, my writing years the print-media age, and my filmmaking years the DV (digital video) age.

BAO: When did the classical age start?

[1] This interview was conducted in Mandarin and online on 26 February 2020. The text transcribed from audio recording and then translated into English. The audio transcript has been edited for publication purposes.

CUI: The classical age was the period when I grew up. It included my undergraduate and master's years, when I studied classical Chinese literature. But reading classical Chinese literature can be traced to a much earlier period. It started when I was in primary school.

CUI: As a child, as soon as I learned how to read and write, I started writing. I did many scribbles; I also wrote something more serious. In the fourth grade, I started writing short stories. Before that, I wrote some poems. Of course, I also wrote a lot of prose and many essays, as was the expectation for a good student at the time; they seemed easy to me. At school, I already felt I was a university student, at least I could write more and longer than many university students. That was the print-media age of my life. I wrote a lot on paper and very few of them have survived. This was unlike the digital age when you can save your writing and later retrieve it through a keyword search.

Although much of my writing during the time was blown away by the wind of time, they gave me a lot of power: the power of independent thinking. No one can teach people to think independently, but one must work hard to think about the world like God, trying to make sense of the world and take control of their life. Such power kept growing in me, outside the official system or mainstream society.

I was a top student before high school; this was a result of the system. Later I studied classical Chinese literature at university; that was also a decision made possible by the system. The system gave me a social identity. But I knew from the outset I can never become part of the system. As an outsider to the system, I have an impulse to destroy and reconstruct the system. I see myself as an explorer, always discontent with how things are and always having an impulse to critique, change and reconstruct the world.

BAO: You became aware of your sexuality at an early age. Did you explore your sexuality in your writing?

CUI: I didn't in those days. The writings I did when I was young, although original, were still influenced by other people's language. A lot of it was conditioned by the Chinese textbooks I read. They constrained my thoughts and imagination. This was understandable for a school pupil: if one didn't follow the convention and style, they'd feel their writing lacked legitimacy. Although I had my own independent spirit, my energy was forced into a rigid framework. It was the square framework of the Chinese characters. It constrained a lot of things. Within the framework, I didn't have freedom to create. In fact, I didn't feel a sense of creative freedom until I went to university. At college, I felt that my writing still needed to be approved by the teachers. The Department of Chinese where I studied had creative writing classes and theory classes. They all required writing articles and essays, and they all had to be graded by the teachers. Of course, I was very suspicious of the teachers. I knew that I could write better than them. I started to write about the things I wanted to write. As I read more, I started to understand the world better. I also developed the skills to write what I wanted and how I wanted to. Although that part of my writing was not recognised by others, I couldn't care less.

The university I attended had a credit system, which meant one could graduate if they acquired enough credits. But when I got home, my parents warned: if you complete the study in two years, you could graduate with the required credits, but no one would treat you as a university graduate because no undergraduate degrees would take only two years to complete. Despite having completed my university credits, I stayed on campus for another two years. Most of the time I read in the library. The library was my classroom, and there I enjoyed complete freedom.

BAO: What did you write at the time?

CUI: I wrote all kinds of things, without limits. I had a student identity to protect me, so I could read and write freely as I wanted to. In fact, this was also true to my later life. After graduation I taught at a film academy. I only gave lectures to students for two and a half years, and yet being a teacher became my lifelong identity, and I could live on a teacher's salary. I started writing novels and short stories when I weren't allowed to teach. After that, I was put into a position as a professional screenwriter. In the Youth Film Studio, I worked as a screenwriter for ten years. During the ten years, I had complete freedom to write. I wrote many novels and short stories. Although my filmmaking was outside the system, there was an institutional framework to support my filmmaking.

This sounds like a paradox. I could have graduated early from college, but I had to stay on campus and remain registered as a student for two more years. Later on, even though the work I was doing was outside the system, and my work was completely disapproved of by the system, the system supported me in doing that work. Such is the complex relationship between the individual, society and history. This is like a torque, which maintains its composition by twisting one axis after another.

BAO: This shows the important of having an independent mind. Many people simply go with the flow and eventually get incorporated into the system. But you managed to do what you wanted to do within the system.

CUI: This was not entirely true. Such a result was also due to the system itself. The system is like a person, and it has a particular type of personality. It chooses its own people. As I'm not its people, it kicks me aside. But it also feels that I'm not that kind of direct democracy symbol. I'm an indirect democracy symbol, or a symbol that's not productive, even though I have participated in the queer movement. When one risks being imprisoned, they find that

their position is a particularly ambiguous one. Because of that ambiguity, they avoid becoming a prisoner.

BAO: What was your first novel?

CUI: After 1989, I lived in Japan for half a year. At that time, I came up with the idea of writing what I considered to be my first full-length novel. I started working on it after I went back to China. It was *Peach-Coloured Lips*, my first book. The novel had a very clear structure. I had originally planned to spend a long time on it. The book was completed sooner than I had expected because the God helped me: I lost my teaching position. I was very busy when I was teaching as I often had to teach eleven courses. Suddenly I couldn't teach anymore and ended up having a lot of time to myself. So I finished writing the novel earlier than originally planned. *Peach-Coloured Lips* was written between 1991 and 1992 and revised in 1993. Then I spent some time taking the manuscript to different publishers trying to get it published. That was in the print-media era.

I'm a very independent person. Since childhood I have known that I must face everything by myself. I took my manuscript directly to the publishers. I only had one copy. Photocopying was not that common and was also very costly at the time. I walked into various publishing houses with my manuscript and asked to see the editors. I visited more than a dozen publishing houses and was eventually rejected by all of them. An editor really liked the manuscript and even offered me a contract. The editor-in-chief told him that they couldn't risk it because the novel was gay-themed. The book was not published in mainland China until 2003. Prior to this, the book was published in Hong Kong in 1997. When Huasheng Publishing House was established, they published the first book titled *The Stories of He Him She Her*, a collection of short stories from across the Strait. The book contained one of my

short stories. The second book they published was my book *Peach-Coloured Lips* and that was in 1997.

I finished the manuscript in 1993 and published the book in 1997. This book reveals an interesting situation: I wrote in simplified Chinese characters, and yet my first novel was published in traditional Chinese. The publishers around me all rejected my manuscript, and yet a publisher in Hong Kong accepted it before I had an opportunity to visit Hong Kong. Life was full of paradoxes.

At the same time, several literary magazines published my short stories and novellas. Some even tried to publish the entire novel. For example, an editor from *The Zhongshan Literary Journal* thought my novel could pioneer a new literary trend. He spent a lot of time and effort promoting my work, but it wasn't successful. At that time, the literary world liked creating new genres. I almost became the figure head of a new literary genre. But these efforts were eventually washed away by the so-called mainstream literature. So I don't believe in things like literary genres, literary history and film history. They are all set up by political power, or by the power of a particular social group. A group of people must have sufficient political influence so they can create a trend in literature or film.

BAO: How did you write? What made you so productive?

CUI: In those ten years, I kept on writing. I held my writing time sacred. I usually got up at one or two o'clock at night and wrote until midday. The twelve-hour period was my most productive writing time. The time after one o'clock in the afternoon was for me to do physical exercises or write for a living. I wrote films and book reviews for various newspapers and magazines. I adhered to this schedule for ten years.

I was working on several projects at the same time. When I was working on *Peach-Coloured Lips*, I was also writing *Bed of Roses* and *Enter the Clowns. Enter the Clowns* was the first

book to be completed. *Bed of Roses* and *Enter the Clowns* had different endings from *Peach-Coloured Lips*. I then went back to edit *Enter the Clowns*. I felt that it shouldn't be as complete and conventional as *Peach-Coloured Lips*. It should be more fragmented, allowing for multiple narratives, and my style should be freer and more imaginative. I felt that I needed to write a completely different text, not the type of literature in the conventional sense. So I put together philosophical musings, short plays and diaries. That was a great experience. After finishing *Enter the Clowns*, I felt that my literary ideas had been truly liberated. I fully expressed my dissatisfaction with existing literature since childhood.

After finishing *Enter the Clowns*, I worked on *Bed of Roses*. I felt I could build something up. If *Enter the Clowns* is fragmentary, messy and uncontrollable, in *Bed of Roses*, a fictional text is merged with two drama texts to form a longer text. Strictly speaking, *Enter the Clowns* and *Bed of Roses* are not novels; they are what I call 'long texts'.

I had a big table in my room, the kind of table that resembled a teacher's office desk. I put four or five stacks of papers on the top. Each stack of paper represented a book project, and they kept moving every day. For example, when I moved *Enter the Clowns* in front of me, the project of *Enter the Clowns* began, and its fictional world started to unfold. When I put it aside, its characters began to rest and fall asleep. Then I picked up another stack of paper, which was *Bed of Roses*. I started working on it. And then I put that aside and started *Pseudo-Science Fiction Stories*. I was writing a series of short stories and novellas at the same time. They were like different planets in the universe. I was doing the job of arranging stars into constellations. To be more precise, I was observing the earth from the vantage points of various stars. *Pseudo-Science Fiction Stories* is about earthlings arriving on other planets, not the other way around. People on earth are like monsters. They are monsters when they go to other planets, because they are full of themselves. They misunderstand other planets. People from other planets criticise the earthling culture as the stories unfold.

When the human body needs to rest, the memory returns to the body, and this memory needs to be processed. So I started to write semi-autobiographical accounts about my own childhood and adolescence. Or perhaps I should say that I started to reflect on that experience. It's a light-illuminating-shadow type of writing that is self-reflexive. Apart from this, I was planning a philosophical novel called *New New Testament*. It's about Jesus having twelve disciples. Among these were Marx, Mao Zedong, and Hu Ge. That was an idea that was never actualised.

In a certain way, Chinese society is not necessarily a homophobic society. For example, when I took my book manuscripts to the publishers, the first and second editors who had read my manuscript were usually very enthusiastic. My manuscripts were rejected because of political reasons. All these reasons were on political grounds, not on cultural grounds. I delivered the manuscripts in person every time. I was what people would call an effeminate person. In the Western context, this image may be well be read as gay or sissy and rejected by mainstream society. But in the Chinese context, people would describe me as bookish or nerdy. They often conflated being feminine with being bookish. I had a naturally fair skin, and in China I didn't bask in the sun. So I fit into the stereotype of being a fair-skinned and fragile scholar. This gave me some bonus points in China at the time. But now, this type of person would be cast in a negative light.

BAO: This might have to do with the popular respect for writers and intellectuals in Chinese society at that time. Today's society doesn't seem to respect writers and intellectuals very much, which is a shame.

CUI: Yes, that was one of the reasons. This brings us back to the topic of print media. In the age of print media, the person had to write each word on the paper. One opened a thick stack of paper, wrote on it with a pen word by word, and then made corrections on every page. All

the traces of that person were imprinted on the paper. When reading, readers could easily detect the movement of the author's body. Their perseverance flowed on the paper. Nowadays, when people read works on the computer, they can't see the author's handwriting or body at all.

BAO: Can I ask why you stopped writing?

CUI: I stopped writing after ten years. This was largely due to the shift from the print media to digital media. Everyone started to write directly on the computer. I was unwilling to make that transition. I chose not to cross over. I think the two modes of writing belong to two language families. I can only write very ordinary things such as Emails on my computer.

BAO: Your works often contain a great deal of fantastic elements, especially in *Pseudo-Science Fiction Stories*. Why is this the case? Is your work meant to critique society or is it a form of self-expression, or an experiment to test how far imagination can travel?

CUI: My literary works can be divided into three types. The first type is pure literature. It follows the conventions of a classical text; for example, there should be characters, a plot and a theme. All things are explained clearly in a piece of work, with narratives and contexts. *Peach Coloured Lips* belongs to this category. This type also includes some of my short stories and novellas, such as *Uncle's Secular Life* and *I Love Shi Dabo*. Many of them are related to my personal experience, to China's social history, and to the conventional literary form. Some of these books were reprinted several times and thus accumulated a larger readership. They are easier to read and understand.

There is another type: the pseudo-science fiction stories. This body of works focuses on the reflection and criticism of the earthling culture from the perspective of extraterrestrials.

There is also the third type, which is dedicated to literary experimentation. It includes works such as *Enter the Clowns* and *Bed of Roses*. It pays more attention to the mechanism of

language and departs from the conventional literary language. This category is not only about protagonists and narratives, but also about how we understand and use literary techniques and methods, and how we see literature itself. Without this body of work, my work wouldn't be complete.

BAO: Your literary works are usually very theoretical. Why is this the case?

CUI: My literary writing has a strong theoretical undertone because I don't separate writing from theorisation, and my interest in theory coexists with my interest in storytelling. This results in the sacrifice of narratives. I like tearing narratives apart and reflecting on the harms that narratives can do to human beings.

Narratives are usually dramatic, and dramatic relationships are often about power relations: who is the protagonist and who is a supporting character, who is hero and who is villain, who is top and who is bottom, who is attacker and who is receiver, whose fate is what, whose destiny is perfect—these are all old and clichéd conventions. The convention is rooted in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. *A Dream of Red Mansions* has its own narrative universe: it's an enclosed system. This is not the system I want to stay in. That's why in my long texts—I don't call them novels—I use theoretical reflections to break up the illusion created by narrative conventions.

BAO: Some literary critics contextualise your writing within the framework of postmodernism. How do you feel about this interpretation?

CUI: This is not the only way to approach my work. I consider myself a postmodern person, but some works such as *Uncle's Secular Life* and *Peach-Coloured Lips* series are not postmodern or modern texts; they are classical texts. These works belong to my classical era. With these works, I bade goodbye to the classical era. Writing is my way to preserve each era.

I usually don't read the things I've written because I can get bored easily. But when I read some of the works I have written, I think to myself: this writer writes very well. Who is the person? He has not compromised with anything, neither the market, nor the so-called pure literature. He has his own world, and that world is very organic. I like this writer.

BAO: Do you have your favourite piece of work?

CUI: I value *Pseudo-Science Fiction Stories* series very much because it hasn't been interpreted and it's difficult to interpret. There is also *Ace of Hearts Blows the Horn*, which is one of my last and also most obscure works.

Appendix: Cui Zi'en's Works

Novels and Short Story Collections

桃色嘴唇 (*Peach-Coloured Lips*). Hong Kong: Worldson Books, 1997; Zhuhai: Zhuhai publishing House, 2003.

丑角登场 (*Enter the Clowns*). Guangzhou: Huacheng Publishing House, 1998: Taipei: Showe Publishing, 2023.

玫瑰床榻 (*Bed of Roses*). Guangzhou: Huacheng Publishing House, 1998.

三角城的童话 (*Fairy Tales of the Triangle City*). Hong Kong: Worldson Books, 1998.

我爱史大勃 (*I Love Shi Dabo*). Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, 2000.

舅舅的人间烟火 (*Uncle's Secular Life*). Zhuhai: Zhuhai Publishing House, 2003.

伪科幻故事 (*Pseudo-Science Fiction Stories*). Zhuhai: Zhuhai Publishing House, 2003; Taipei: Showe Publishing, 2023.

红桃 A 吹响号角 (*Ace of Hearts Blows the Horn*). Zhuhai: Zhuhai Publishing House, 2003.

有谁上过我的床 (*Who Have Been in Bed with Me*). Black and Blue Literature, 2003.

胭脂的下落 (*The Whereabouts of Rouge*). Yunnan: Yunnan People's Press, 2006.

Literary and Film Criticism

李渔小说论稿 (Critical Essays on the Novels of Li Yü). Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1987.

青春的悲剧 (Tragedy of the Youth). Beijing: China Peace Press, 1988.

电影羁旅 (Travel in Film). Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, 1993.

艺术家的宇宙 (The Artist's Universe). Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1993.

第一观众 (The First Audience). Beijing: Xiandai Publishing House, 2003.

艺术家万岁 (Long Live the Artist), Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Publishing House, 2004.

光影记忆 (Memories of Light and Shadow), Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2005.

Work in English Translation

Cui Zi'en. *Platinum Bible of the Public Toilet*, edited and with an introduction by Lisa Rofel and Petrus Liu. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024.

Interview

白睿文(Michael Berry). 丑角登场：崔子恩的酷儿影像 (Enter the Clowns: Cui Zi'en's Queer Cinema). Taipei: Showe Publishing, 2023.