

From Family Rupture to Chosen Intimacy: Character Trajectories and Social Marginalization in *Niezi* (*Crystal Boys*)

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Bai Xianying's *Niezi* (*Crystal Boys*) through the trajectory from family rupture to chosen intimacy, analyzing how homosexuality triggers familial breakdown and how sexual-minority characters reorganize belonging after leaving home. Family rupture is treated as a socially mediated process, arising when same-sex desire becomes visible within familial and institutional structures. The study asks how the novel narrativizes rupture following the exposure of homosexuality and how the three main characters construct chosen/alternative intimacies under conditions of marginalization. Methodologically, it employs close reading, thematic coding, and comparative analysis across characters. Drawing on Barnwell's work on estrangement and Weston's theory of chosen family, alongside the concepts of stigma, discipline, and gender normativity, the paper argues that *Niezi* narrativizes rupture as a collision between homosexuality and familial authority, producing rejection and displacement. In turn, chosen intimacy emerges as a survival strategy shaped by unequal access to space, resources, and recognition, thereby revealing the social marginalization of homosexuality in the Taiwanese context represented in the novel.

Keywords: comrade literature, chosen intimacy, family rupture, stigma, urban marginalization

INTRODUCTION

Comrade literature, known as *tongzhi wenxue* (同志文学), is literary genre uniquely Chinese, which centers on the representations of homosexuality. Rachel Leng defines it as “an indigenous genre characterized by fictions of homosexuality” (2012, p. 1). In contemporary China, cyberspace has played an important role in the development of this genre, as the social and political sensitivity surrounding *tongxinglian* (homosexuality) made online anonymity particularly valuable for queer expression. Loretta Ho (2010) notes that the first contemporary Chinese gay novel, *Beijing Gushi* (*A Story from Beijing*), was initially published online (p. 112), showing how digital platforms became crucial spaces for the emergence and circulation of Chinese queer writing.

Comrade literature occupies an important position in contemporary Chinese literature, particularly as a space for articulating queer experience within a Chinese social and cultural context. As Ho (2010) notes, “Comrade Literature as an online literary genre provides a valuable space for many gay netizens in China to represent themselves, to themselves and to the wider Chinese community” (p. 112). These works often feature romantic, painful, and emotionally charged narratives of same-sex relationships in China. However, comrade literature differs significantly from what is commonly understood as queer literature in Western contexts, especially in its treatment of identity disclosure. Niu argues that Western norms of queer “coming out” and “declaring identity” can be risky within Chinese social, cultural, and political contexts because homosexual desire challenges not only sexual norms but also the heteronormative institutions of marriage and family (2017, p. 4). For this reason, protagonists in comrade literature rarely choose to come out voluntarily. Instead, these narratives often begin with the protagonist concealing their queer identity or having their sexual orientation exposed by family members. In so doing, comrade literature does not depict the lives of gay individuals. It also foregrounds the tension between social expectations and individual desires. Thus, the genre represents not only conflicts between gay protagonists and their families, but also broader forms of resistance against Confucian family ethics and mainstream traditional social values in China.

One of the major literary figures in comrade literature is Bai Xianyong, or Pai Hsien-yung (白先勇). He is known as a major figure in Chinese culture through his creative writing, his role in the performing arts, the cinematic adaptation of his works, and his non-fiction. He has had an indelible impact on the cultural life of the Chinese people in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas. Bai is a Taiwanese writer educated in English literature and creative writing, whose modernist narratives often engage social marginality and urban experience. His father is Bai Chongxi, a Kuomintang general whose figure is associated with a stern, patriarchal family order. That intergenerational structure resonates with *Niezi* (*Crystal Boys*), where filial expectation, discipline, and non-normative desire repeatedly come into conflict. In this sense, Bai's authorial position helps explain why family discipline and the politics of respectability become central pressures in the novel's portrayal of post-rupture queer life.

Bai Xianyong's most celebrated gay-themed novel, *Niezi* (孽子), translated into English as *Crystal Boys*, vividly portrays gay subculture in Taiwan, particularly the lives of marginalized young gay men in Taipei's New Park. The novel has received extensive scholarly attention, as seen in studies that examine its queer identity formation, politics of sexual shame, homosexual identification, emotional regime, translation history, and cross-media adaptation. For example, Fran Martin (2003) discusses the novel's central position in Taiwanese queer representation, while Hans Huang (2010) analyzes its relation to *tongzhi* identity formation and sexual shame. Flair Shi (2017) examines homosexual identification in the novel, Jiang Linshan (2019) explores its emotional politics and affective structure, and Bo Li (2020) studies its translations, reprints, and cross-medium retranslations. This range of scholarship confirms the novel's significance not only as a literary representation of homosexuality, but also as a foundational text in the study of modern Chinese queer writing. Martin notes that *Crystal Boys* "has been the subject of critical attention and praise from the literary establishment as well as from *tongzhi* cultural commentators" (2003, p. 54). He further observes that "locally, the framing of this novel as the inauguration of the field of modern Chinese homosexual fiction is now common" (2003, p. 55). Because of its literary, cultural, and scholarly importance, this paper chooses *Crystal Boys* as the primary object of study.

Niezi centers on a gay community surviving at the margins of society as hustlers. Martin describes the novel as recounting "the stories of a community of male sex workers and their clients and patrons based in and around New Park in the martial law era of the early 1970s" (2003, p. 55). The novel follows Li Qing, a high school student expelled from school after being caught in what the institution defines as "obscene misdemeanors (淫褻行为)" in the school laboratory. Cast out of his dysfunctional family by his father, Li Qing drifts into New Park (now called 228 Park), a well-known gathering place for gay men in Taipei, where he joins a group of hustlers that includes Xiao Yu, Wu Min, and Mousy (Lao Shu), who all share a similar family background. In New Park, they constantly face the threat of being raided and captured. In martial-law Taiwan, "it was a particular 'Chinese nation' and state apparatus during the martial law period" that, "through their deployment of police raids," "regularly made the martial-law-period New Park into a 'landscape of fear' for its homosexual occupants" (Martin, 2003, p. 54). Here "state apparatus" refers to the policing and regulatory institutions that managed public morality under martial law. In practical terms, "police raids" mean periodic crackdowns that disperse gatherings, intimidate occupants, and frame same-sex presence in public space as a punishable crime. This is why New Park becomes a "landscape of fear," that is, a space of possibility for meeting and belonging, yet at the same time, a space where visibility can immediately trigger surveillance, harassment, and forced dispersal. In this socio-political climate, Bai Xianyong's *Niezi* explores the fear and disconnection from the family of gay community.

This paper focuses on that condition of hardship, but more specifically on how homosexuality triggers family rupture and how that rupture is later transformed into social relations after leaving home. Rather than treating expulsion and marginalization simply as tragic endpoints, we read family rupture as a narrative precondition produced when same-sex desire is exposed, named as shameful, and judged

incompatible with filial respectability. In the politico-historical context of 1970s Taiwan, Confucian family values became entangled with heteronormative governance and pushed the “crystal boys” toward the margins (Shi, 2017, p. 148). Accordingly, the paper poses two central research questions. First, how does *Niezi* narrativize and stage family rupture because of homosexuality being discovered, disclosed, or socially marked? Second, after that rupture, how does the novel depict the formation of chosen or alternative intimacy under conditions of social marginalization? By comparing the character trajectories of Li Qing, Xiao Yu, and A Feng, the analysis shifts attention from merely labeling the text as “gay-themed” to examining the social mechanics of survival, that is, how support, shelter, and belonging are produced under conditions of stigma and scarce resources, and why similar structural pressures generate different relational strategies and different outcomes.

To address these questions, this paper uses the trajectory from family rupture to a chosen intimacy. This trajectory shows a two-stage movement structuring the experiences of the main characters. The first stage is family rupture, namely, the moment or process through which homosexuality becomes legible to the family or institution and consequently produces rejection, expulsion, disowning, silence, or the withdrawal of care. The second stage is chosen intimacy, that is, the improvised formation of peer care, substitute kinship, erotic attachment, domestic arrangement, or mutual protection after the natal family can no longer function as a safe or legitimate home. Methodologically, the analysis combines close reading, thematic coding, and cross-character comparison, with particular attention to Li Qing, Xiao Yu, and A Feng.

Family rupture, which is central to his paper, does not refer simply to ordinary disagreement within the household. Instead, it refers to a break in familial recognition caused by the family’s inability or refusal to accommodate homosexuality within the expected script of filial obedience, marriage, reproduction, and masculine respectability. Barnwell’s discussion of family estrangement is useful because it shows that distance from family is not merely a private matter but is shaped by social expectations about what family closeness should mean (2024, p. x). In *Niezi*, homosexuality triggers family rupture because it is treated as a sign of shame that threatens the family’s social standing and its claim to normality. Thus, rupture appears not only as physical removal from home, but also as emotional coldness, silence, bureaucratic expulsion, the erasure of kin recognition, and the loss of a legitimate place within the family.

Chosen intimacy is another key concept used in this paper because the novel does not end with the loss of the natal family. Following Weston, “gay families could not be understood apart from the families in which lesbians and gay men had grown up” (1991, p. 3). This insight is important because the chosen bonds in *Niezi* are not presented as simple substitutes for biological families. They emerge from rupture and remain marked by the conditions that caused that rupture: stigma, poverty, surveillance, lack of legal recognition, and the need to survive in marginal spaces. Chosen intimacy in this paper, therefore, refers to the fragile but necessary relational practices through which the characters create care after rejection, including friendship, substitute brotherhood, patronage, domestic arrangement, erotic attachment, and everyday acts of protection.

The other theoretical lenses that we use in the analysis are Foucault’s account of disciplinary power and Link and Phelan’s concept of stigma. Foucault’s idea of disciplinary power treats family as a micro-site of normalization. Discipline works through ordinary routines, language, and expectations, producing what Foucault calls “docile” bodies (1995, p. 138). This concept is applied where the novel stages institutional and familial mechanisms of correction, surveillance, and exemplary punishment. Link and Phelan’s concept of stigma is used to explain how labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination turn homosexuality into social exclusion (2001, p. 363). Butler’s concept of gender performativity is integrated where the narrative shows masculinity, proper sonhood, and family respectability as repeated social scripts rather than natural identities. This arrangement keeps the conceptual

focus on family rupture and chosen intimacy while allowing the other theories to support the close readings in the relevant sections.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section is organized directly around the study's two research questions. The first subsection examines how *Niezi* narrativizes family rupture through the trajectories of Li Qing, Xiao Yu, and A Feng. The second subsection analyzes how, after rupture, those characters construct chosen or alternative intimacy under conditions of social marginalization. Framing the discussion in this way keeps the analysis aligned with the paper's central argument while still allowing cross-character comparison.

Family Rupture

Family rupture, also known as family estrangement, refers to a situation in which a person is forced to leave, expelled from, or emotionally severed from the existing family. This idea finds support in Barnwell, who writes that “[f]amily estrangement is a common yet understudied phenomenon, especially in the sociology of family and personal life” (2024, p. x). In *Niezi*, however, family rupture has a more specific causal structure: homosexuality triggers rupture when same-sex desire becomes visible and is interpreted as a threat to family reputation, filial continuity, and heterosexual marriage. The novel therefore narrates rupture not as a random family dispute, but as the consequence of a social order that treats homosexual desire as shameful and incompatible with proper sonhood. When sexual orientation does not conform to mainstream social norms, it can lead to the accusation of bringing shame to the family and to exclusion from familial protection. After leaving home, Li Qing, Xiao Yu, and A Feng enter New Park, a world defined as illegitimate from the outset, meaning that their later forms of intimacy cannot rely on legal or familial legitimacy and must instead be improvised under conditions of recognition. The novel then politicizes marginal space through the manifesto of “our kingdom (我们的王国)”: it has “only night and no day (只有黑夜, 没有白天)” because it is an “utterly illegal country (极不合法的国度)”; it “has no government and no constitution (没有政府, 没有宪法)” because it is “neither recognized nor respected (不被承认, 不受尊重)” (Bai, p. 7). Such a manifesto fantasizes a queer utopia while also exposing the social and political conditions that force queer belonging into illegitimate space.

Bai Xianyong shows that estrangement in *Niezi* is inseparable from the pressure to preserve familial respectability. More importantly, the novel makes clear that homosexuality is the trigger through which that pressure becomes punitive: once same-sex desire is discovered, the family and its allied institutions respond through shame, surveillance, expulsion, and abandonment. Foucault's account of discipline explains how the family and allied institutions regulate “normal” life scripts through surveillance, correction, and exemplary punishment. Link and Phelan's concept of stigma clarifies how labeling, stereotyping, separation, and status loss transform difference into exclusion. Butler's concept of gender performativity is relevant because the novel repeatedly suggests that “being a proper son” is not an essence but an enforced script tied to masculinity and filial duty. Across Li Qing, Xiao Yu, and A Feng, family rupture appears as differently patterned but structurally related: institutionalized expulsion, stigma-laden absence, and chronic abandonment.

Li Qing's trajectory presents the clearest example of rupture as discipline. His exclusion begins with bureaucratic language rather than intimate conversation. The school notice identifies him as “student Li Qing (学生李青),” states that he was “caught on the spot (当场捕获),” and justifies expulsion through phrases such as “improper conduct (品行不端),” “serious wrongdoing (恶性重大),” and behavior “damaging to the school's reputation (有碍校誉),” before declaring that he should be expelled “as a warning to others (以儆效尤)” (Bai, p. 4). This language shows how rupture is narrativized through

institutional discourse that classifies, records, and ejects. In Foucauldian terms, discipline does not merely punish Li Qing; it produces him as a cautionary object whose removal reaffirms the norm for everyone else. The vocabulary of “warning” and “reputation” shows that the issue is not only individual misconduct but the maintenance of moral order. Once same-sex desire becomes legible, Li Qing is no longer treated as a son whose future must be cultivated, but as a contaminating figure whose presence threatens collective respectability. Link and Phelan’s model is useful here because the sequence is clear: Li Qing is labeled, associated with deviance, separated from legitimate student hood, and subjected to status loss through expulsion. The novel stages the break not as accidental misfortune, but as a socially organized removal of a noncompliant subject.

Yet Li Qing’s family rupture is not exhausted by formal expulsion. Bai extends it into the intimate sphere and shows that the deepest wound lies in the erosion of the few kin relations that remain available to him. After his mother leaves, Li Qing’s strongest emotional bond is with his younger brother, Diwa (弟弟). The novel recalls that on the night of the mother’s departure, Diwa sleeps beside Li Qing, who “cuddled” him and “stroked his back like mother did (便搂着他, 学母亲拍着他的背)” (Bai, p. 58). The scene is significant because it reverses normative family roles: Li Qing becomes an improvised caregiver inside a household already falling apart. This detail complicates moral judgments against him. The supposedly deviant son is also the one who performs care. Butler’s idea of performativity helps illuminate this irony. Li Qing fails the dominant script of masculine, filial normality, yet he succeeds in performing tenderness, responsibility, and kin care. The tragedy is that these practices do not restore recognition, because the family is governed by heteronormative legibility rather than by care itself. After leaving home, Li Qing dreams that Diwa asks, “A’Qing, where is my harmonica? (阿青, 我的口琴呢?)” (Bai, p. 39). The harmonica, which Li Qing calls “the only thing I brought from home (是我从家里唯一带出来的东西)” (Bai, p. 39), turns home into a fragment of memory. Later, at Diwa’s funeral, rupture reaches its most irreversible form when Li Qing grasps his brother’s ice-cold hand and watches his body placed into a small coffin. Here rupture becomes more than rejection. It becomes the transformation of kinship into absence, memory, and non-return.

If Li Qing’s rupture is narrated through expulsion and bereavement, Xiao Yu’s is narrated through the chronic stigma of origin. The novel does not center his story on one singular moment of banishment. Instead, it emphasizes how the absence of the father becomes a durable wound that structures selfhood before any later attachments begin. Xiao Yu, who is half Japanese and half Chinese, tells the others, “I’m a fatherless bastard. I’ve never seen my father, nor do I know who he is (告诉你们我是一个无父的野种? 我从来没见过我老爸, 也不知道他是谁)” (Bai, p. 103). He does not merely say that his father is absent; he speaks through the language of insult, repeating the vocabulary that has already marked him as illegitimate. Link and Phelan’s framework is especially illuminating here. Labeling and stereotyping are internalized so deeply that Xiao Yu becomes both the target and the speaker of stigma. The novel also shows how separation and status loss extend into bureaucratic self-management. Xiao Yu routinely writes “deceased” in the parental-status section of official forms, even though he still dreams that his father might someday return (Bai, p. 103). The contradiction matters. It suggests that rupture is lived as both concealment and yearning. Barnwell notes that estrangement is shaped by the burden of disclosure, and Xiao Yu’s paperwork exemplifies that burden: he must make his family story narratable in an official format, but only by falsifying it into something less shameful. In his case, family rupture is not staged as dramatic expulsion; it is narrated as the withdrawal of recognizability.

A Feng’s trajectory presents family rupture as chronic abandonment and damaged prehistory, and it needs to be read from A Feng’s own position rather than only through Longzi’s later memory of him. Compared with Li Qing and Xiao Yu, A Feng enters the narrative from a point where the family has already ceased to function as a meaningful source of safety. From his perspective, the loss of home is not a single

event that can be clearly narrated or mourned; it is an already normalized condition. He repeatedly appears as someone who has long known how to move between the street, New Park, and temporary arrangements for survival, suggesting that the movement from home to margin is not a sudden fall but a route he has learned to inhabit. This broadens the paper's understanding of rupture. *Niezi* does not restrict estrangement to explicit scenes of expulsion; it also depicts lives in which familial failure has become the background of everyday existence long before the main plot begins.

Seen from A Feng's perspective, homosexuality triggers rupture not through one dramatic confrontation with the father, as in Li Qing's case, but through the gradual disappearance of any secure familial position from which he could be recognized as a proper son. He does not seem to possess a home to which he can meaningfully return, and this absence makes the street, and the park appear not only as sites of desire but also as substitutes for the household that has failed him. Foucault's lens helps clarify the severity of this condition. If discipline works by training subjects into legible routines, A Feng appears as a subject for whom the family has failed even to provide the minimal framework of security and recognition. Butler's idea of performative normality is equally useful: A Feng has almost no viable stage on which to perform the script of legitimate sonhood. Instead, survival itself becomes his primary routine. Without family protection, he is left radically exposed to social labeling, bodily vulnerability, and the forms of exploitation that become easier when a queer youth is already outside recognized kinship.

Taken together, these three trajectories, namely, Li Qing's disciplinary expulsion, Xiao Yu's stigma-laden paternal absence, and A Feng's chronic abandonment, show that *Niezi* narrativizes family rupture through different but structurally related forms. show that *Niezi* narrativizes family rupture through multiple forms, but all of them are linked by the same larger structure of heteronormative governance. Li Qing's story foregrounds homosexuality as a discovered offense that triggers disciplinary expulsion; Xiao Yu's foregrounds the stigma of origin and the shame attached to illegitimate family history; and A Feng's foregrounds chronic abandonment, where the loss of familial protection has already become a condition of life. What unites them is the novel's insistence that family rupture is not reducible to private disappointment. It is produced by "normal life scripts" that define who may remain legible within kinship and who must be cast out, hidden, or left unprotected. Bai narrativizes rupture through discourse, memory, silence, paperwork, grief, and bodily precarity. By distributing rupture differently across Li Qing, Xiao Yu, and A Feng, *Niezi* shows that marginalization begins from distinct familial histories, and that the loss of home may appear as punishment, as shameful absence, or as the normalization of neglect. This differentiation prepares the ground for the second research question: once familial recognition has been withdrawn in such unequal ways, the characters must search for belonging elsewhere, but the kinds of intimacy they later build are already shaped by the specific form of rupture each has endured.

Chosen Intimacy

Once separated from their families, the characters of *Niezi* do not enter a neutral social world; they move into a field already marked by illegitimacy, surveillance, and unequal recognition. Because homosexuality has triggered family rupture, the characters must construct intimacy in spaces where their desires and relationships are already denied public legitimacy. For this reason, the second research question cannot be answered simply by identifying who becomes close to whom. It must instead ask how intimacy is made possible when the social environment has already defined those bonds as improper. Chosen intimacy is particularly common within the gay community because sexual-minority subjects are more likely to be ostracized from their original families or unable to sustain stable familial ties under pressure on their sexual orientation. According to Weston, "gay families could not be understood apart from the families in which lesbians and gay men had grown up" (1991, p. 3). When family is no longer considered a safe haven, people may favor intimate relationships of their choosing that help ameliorate their personal conditions. Weston's account of chosen family is especially useful here because it insists that gay kinship

cannot be separated from the families from which lesbians and gay men have been expelled, disappointed, or estranged. In *Niezi*, chosen intimacy emerges precisely because the biological family no longer functions as a reliable source of care. Yet Bai Xianyong refuses to romanticize that process. New Park is imagined as “our kingdom (我们的王国),” a place with “only night and no day (只有黑夜, 没有白天)” because it is an “utterly illegal country (极不合法的国度),” and one with “no government and no constitution (没有政府, 没有宪法)” because it is “neither recognized nor respected (不被承认, 不受尊重)” (Bai, p. 7). This manifesto offers a fantasy of queer belonging, but it also announces the conditions under which such belonging must be built: stigma, police surveillance, resource scarcity, and denied public legitimacy. Link and Phelan’s concept of stigma helps explain how denied public legitimacy, surveillance, and social exclusion make the men in New Park vulnerable and increase their dependence on alternative forms of intimacy and support. They are labeled, separated from respectable life, and made vulnerable through the combined force of public contempt and state power. In such a world, chosen intimacy becomes necessary as survival infrastructure, but it can never be innocent of the pressures that made it necessary in the first place.

Li Qing’s trajectory offers the novel’s clearest image of chosen intimacy as routine care and everyday recognition. After family rupture, what sustains him is not a stable household but a set of repeated gestures through which he is remembered, awaited, and temporarily folded back into relation. This dynamic is evident in the “The Cozy Nest” (安乐乡) episode, where the pub operated by the hustlers’ functions as a cover for *tongzhi* sociality, meeting, and relational brokerage. Xiao Yu tells Li Qing that Yu Hao has been looking for him and asks, “Li Qing? Will he still come tonight?” Just go and greet him” (“李青呢? 他今晚还会来么? 你快过去招呼他去吧。”) (Bai, p. 316). The significance of the scene lies not in romance alone, but in the fact that Li Qing is expected. Someone notices his absence and reserves a place for his presence in the evening’s routine. Li Qing then “hurries over to greet him,” while Yu Hao has already come “for several nights in a row” simply to sit and talk with him (Bai, p. 316). Through Weston’s lens, this is chosen intimacy in one of its most basic forms: not a formalized family structure, but an accumulation of small recognitions that make life on the margins minimally habitable. Foucault’s account of discipline deepens the contrast. If the school and the patriarchal household sought to classify Li Qing as deviant and expel him from normative space, the pub creates a counter-routine in which he becomes legible not as a cautionary object but as someone whose return matters. Even so, stability remains provisional because the same intimacy must exist under the threat of raids and exposure.

Li Qing’s most explicit construction of chosen intimacy appears in his relationship with Xiao Di, where substitute kinship is built through bodily care, material sacrifice, and protective responsibility. The episode begins in degradation. In New Park, the mentally disabled child is publicly displayed as an object of ridicule, hawked by an older gay man crying, “Fifty yuan! Fifty yuan. Any takers?” (“五十洋! 五十洋谁要?”) while the crowd joins in humiliating remarks (Bai, pp. 179–181). Li Qing interrupts this spectacle by saying, “I’ll take him away” (“我来把他带走”) (Bai, p. 182). When asked his name, the child can only say “Xiao Di,” literally “little brother,” and Li Qing accepts the term: “All right... I’ll just call you Xiao Di” (“好吧.....我也叫你小弟好了”) (Bai, p. 183). Kinship is not inherited here; it is named into being through response and daily practice. Li Qing then feeds him milk and expensive fruit, arranges day care, and protects him from ridicule when others laugh at the child lying naked on the bed because clothing is unaffordable (Bai, pp. 183–191). Weston helps explain why such actions matter: chosen kinship is produced through practical labor, not sentiment alone. Yet the scene also reveals the limits of care under stigma. Li Qing’s bond with Xiao Di is emotionally real, but it is institutionally illegible. When the police later remove the child, Li Qing cannot secure him administratively because Xiao Di has “no surname, no name” and their tie has no official standing (Bai, p. 219). Butler’s emphasis on social intelligibility clarifies the irony. Li Qing performs care, tenderness, and responsibility, but because he has already been marked as deviant,

those acts do not become recognizable as legitimate kinship. Chosen intimacy sustains life, yet the public sphere can erase it because it does not fit the script of proper family.

If Li Qing's chosen intimacy is built through care and repetition, Xiao Yu's is shaped more openly by calculation, because for him attachment is inseparable from access to shelter, mobility, and future possibility. The original wound of paternal absence remains crucial here. Having grown up without a father and having internalized the stigma of that condition, Xiao Yu cannot treat intimacy as a purely emotional refuge. He must also ask what kind of relationship can be secured. The original draft helps sharpen this point: his lack of paternal love produces not only longing but a practical understanding that intimacy, under marginal conditions, often carries the burden of material provision. This is why the novel presents him as the character most visibly aware of exchangeability. Unlike Li Qing, who tends to move toward protective care, Xiao Yu approaches attachment as something that must also provide safety and a route upward. Weston's theory remains relevant here, but in a more complicated register. Chosen family does not appear as a sentimental substitute for the lost home; it appears as a negotiated structure assembled under scarcity. Link and Phelan's theory of stigma explains why this negotiation is necessary. Because Xiao Yu has already been pushed into a world of diminished respectability, the relationships available to him are shaped by unequal power, public judgment, and the need to manage exposure. Bai's narrative does not condemn him for that realism. Instead, it shows that in a stigmatized environment, the desire to be cared for and the desire to survive are often indistinguishable.

This logic becomes explicit when Xiao Yu is accused of using intimacy strategically. Li Qing mocks him for "hooking a big fish and playing the long line," but Xiao Yu refuses the accusation and replies, "What schemes? People always want to climb up, right?" ("什么心计呢，人总想往上爬么，对不对？") (Bai, p. 148). The line should not be read only as cynicism. It articulates the novel's recognition that under marginalization, intimacy may also function as a means of social mobility. The same sequence links Xiao Yu's aspirations to cooking school, learning knife skills, and possibly returning to formal education, suggesting that attachment is tied to futurity as much as to immediate shelter. The pattern intensifies in his relationship with Captain Long, whom Xiao Yu calls "the savior of my destiny" ("命中救星"), a figure associated not only with desire but with rescue and advancement (Bai, pp. 297–298). Butler's account of performativity also clarifies his defensive style. Xiao Yu often speaks through sarcasm and bravado, performing indifference even while carrying unresolved longing. This self-presentation is itself a survival tactic. He wants intimacy, but he fears subordination; he wants support, but he distrusts the power relations that often accompany it. As a result, his chosen intimacy oscillates between warmth and calculation, dependence and refusal. The novel is careful not to reduce him to an opportunist. Instead, it shows that strategy is one of the forms intimacies takes when survival, recognition, and aspiration have all been rendered precarious.

A Feng's trajectory presents the darkest and most precarious version of chosen intimacy because the conditions surrounding him are more extreme. From A Feng's perspective, intimacy is attractive not simply because it promises affection, but because it offers the possibility of being sheltered, fed, and temporarily removed from the exposure of the street. If Li Qing finds brief stability through mutual care and Xiao Yu tries to convert attachment into mobility, A Feng enters intimacy from a position where abandonment and bodily vulnerability are already normalized. His relationship with Longzi initially appears to offer the most concrete substitute for home. Longzi rents him a small apartment and furnishes it with an electric fan, a rice cooker, a sofa, and a television set, thereby staging a miniature domestic world within the city's hostile margins (Bai, p. 94). The detail matters because it shows that chosen intimacy in *Niezi* can take explicitly domestic form. For A Feng, these household objects are not merely signs of Longzi's generosity; they mark the possibility of having an address, a room, and a daily life less exposed to public humiliation. Weston's framework helps illuminate this as a form of chosen kinship: a life improvised outside the biological family through the material labor of creating a place to live. Yet the scene also

exposes how fragile such domesticity is when it is not supported by broader structures of recognition. Longzi can provide shelter, but not legitimacy. Care is therefore never free from dependency. The apartment looks like refuge, but it cannot guarantee equality or durable protection.

The instability of that refuge becomes clearer when the scene is read through A Feng's vulnerable position rather than only through Longzi's jealousy. A Feng's presence by the lotus pond on New Year's Eve, bargaining with "a fat, ugly old drunk" for fifty yuan, should not be reduced to betrayal or moral failure (Bai, p. 94). It reveals the survival logic that continues to structure his life even after he has been drawn into an intimate arrangement. From A Feng's perspective, being loved does not automatically cancel hunger, insecurity, or the need to manage his own body as a resource in a hostile economy. This is where Link and Phelan's concept of stigma become crucial. Because A Feng is already separated from respectable social life and denied legitimate forms of support, the choices available to him are narrowed before he acts. The same-sex bond that seems to rescue him therefore does not fully remove him from marginality; it relocates marginality inside the intimate relation itself. Longzi reads A Feng's action as a wound to love, but A Feng's action also discloses the structural fact that chosen intimacy cannot protect him completely from economic precarity and bodily exposure.

This contradiction explains why A Feng's chosen intimacy turns into the novel's most violent limit case. Longzi's later demand to "give me back my heart" culminates in the final stabbing (Bai, pp. 95, 436–437). The point is not simply that their relationship fails, but that the relationship becomes the place where shelter, possession, jealousy, and violence converge. Foucault's ideas help illuminate the pattern beyond individual psychology. When subjects are denied legitimate forms of recognition and pushed into informal economies of survival, power tends to circulate through personal relations in intensified and unstable ways. Butler's insights into the norms governing recognizable attachment are also relevant. Because A Feng and Longzi's relationship lack public legitimacy, it cannot stabilize itself through shared scripts of partner hood, kinship, or recognized obligation. Instead, it becomes vulnerable to volatile improvisation, where the terms of care, loyalty, and possession remain dangerously unsettled. A Feng's tragedy is therefore not only that he is killed by the person who claims to love him. It is that the only available shelter is also a structure of dependency, and the intimacy that temporarily saves him becomes the channel through which violence is delivered.

Taken together, Li Qing, Xiao Yu, and A Feng show that chosen intimacy in *Niezi* is neither a simple replacement for the biological family nor a uniformly liberating queer alternative. Rather, it is a set of relational practices improvised after homosexuality has triggered rupture within a stigmatized social order. Li Qing's trajectory emphasizes routine care, substitute kinship, and the fragile dignity of being remembered. Xiao Yu's highlights calculation, exchange, and the desire to convert intimacy into security and upward movement. A Feng's reveals the point at which care collapses into possession and violence, especially when intimacy is read from the perspective of someone who has almost no recognized protection outside the relationship. Across all three, Weston's theory clarifies why chosen bonds become indispensable after the failure of the natal family, while Link and Phelan explain why those bonds remain burdened by status loss, surveillance, and denied legitimacy. Foucault clarifies that intimacy is built in the shadow of institutions that have already disciplined queer subjects out of normative life, and Butler shows that even deeply felt forms of care may remain unintelligible when they do not match authorized scripts of kinship, masculinity, and domestic order. In response to the second research question, then, the novel suggests that the characters construct chosen intimacy through care, exchange, domestic improvisation, and protective routine, but always under conditions that make those bonds vulnerable. Chosen intimacy is therefore the novel's survival infrastructure, yet it is never free from cost. It offers shelter and belonging, even as it remains exposed to erasure, dependency, humiliation, and violence.

CONCLUSION

In response to the two research questions, the trajectories of Li Qing, Xiao Yu, and A Feng converge on a shared struggle to reconstruct belonging after homosexuality has triggered rupture from the family, but they do so in markedly different ways. Li Qing experiences family rupture through institutionalized expulsion and repeated kin loss; Xiao Yu lives it as the ongoing shame and absence of origin; and A Feng experiences it as chronic abandonment in which the loss of protection has already become the background of survival. In each case, rupture produces vulnerability, but it also makes alternative relational strategies necessary.

Across the novel, marginalization is lived through the unequal distribution of space, safety, resources, and recognition. Li Qing secures temporary stability through routine care within a peer network. Xiao Yu turns intimacy into a means of access, mobility, and protection. A Feng occupies the most precarious position, where care remains inseparable from bodily vulnerability, transaction, dependency, and violence. These differences show that marginality does not produce one uniform queer experience; rather, it shapes a range of survival strategies with uneven consequences.

Chosen intimacy, therefore, emerges in *Niezi* as both survival infrastructure and relational technology. It offers companionship, shelter, and forms of substitute kinship, yet it also carries costs in the form of dependency, exchange, humiliation, and renewed vulnerability. Li Qing's relationships are comparatively sustainable because they rely on repeated acts of mutual recognition, even though they remain institutionally fragile. Xiao Yu's more strategic use of intimacy opens possibilities for advancement, but at the risk of emotional compromise and unequal dependence. In A Feng's case, the logic of care is so deeply entangled with transaction and possession that intimacy culminates in destruction.

In theoretical terms, Barnwell's concept of family estrangement and Weston's theory of chosen family clarify the connection between the loss of familial belonging and the construction of alternative intimacy. Barnwell's framework shows that estrangement in *Niezi* is not merely an interpersonal failure between parents and children, but a socially mediated process shaped by expectations of family normality, filial duty, and acceptable sexuality. Weston's framework, in turn, demonstrates that chosen family cannot be separated from the failure or withdrawal of natal-family recognition from which it emerges. Read together within the context of martial-law Taiwan, these frameworks suggest that family rupture and chosen intimacy are interconnected processes shaped not only by private relationships but also by wider structures of social regulation and exclusion. The supporting concepts of stigma, discipline, and gender normativity further explain how labeling, surveillance, and expectations of proper masculinity and sonhood make these alternative bonds necessary while also limiting their security and recognition. *Niezi* therefore shows that queer belonging is constructed within, rather than outside, conditions of marginalization, revealing how family, social stigma, and state regulation together shape both the loss of home and the search for alternative forms of belonging.

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