

Tiantian Zheng. *Tongzhi Living: Men Attracted to Men in Postsocialist China*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. 272. pp. ISBN 9780816692002 (paperback).

Tiantian Zheng's *Tongzhi Living* is an ethnographic inquiry into the recent lives and experiences of same-sex-attracted, or *tongzhi*, men in Dalian – an urban city in northeast China – from 2005 to 2013. Based on the assumption that “the Chinese *tongzhi* is not a category nor a structure, but rather a complex, dialectic process of making and remaking” (p. 12), Zheng's study ambitiously sets out to examine the current configuration of male same-sex desires in the postsocialist era as a product of continuing historical transformation since the imperial period. Organized into seven major chapters, the book consists of a critical overview of the historical backgrounds and popular perceptions of same-sex desire in China (Chapters 1 to 2), and a collection of case studies encompassing the multiple dimensions of *tongzhi* culture (Chapters 3 to 7). While most, if not all, of the topical issues discussed in this ethnography have previously been researched at great length by scholars (e.g. family, identity management, marriage to women, and HIV/AIDS activism), Zheng has produced some revisionist insights through her observation of various aspects of *tongzhi* men's lives. In particular, her discussions on the differences in gender roles and social class are remarkably worthwhile.

In her analysis of class, for instance, Zheng outlines a new social hierarchy based on the occupations of her informants: namely, 1) gold- and red-collar 2) white-, blue- and gray-collar and 3) money boys. Instead of simply arguing that such class division creates conflict within the *tongzhi* community, Zheng has articulated the ways in which class governs sexual practices through socio-spatial segregation. While the gold- and red-collar *tongzhi* men's economic privileges enable them to achieve sexual pleasures in private transactional relationships, their white-, blue- and gray-collar counterparts have to risk jeopardizing their identity in public cruising areas in order to satisfy their desires. Furthermore, Zheng has examined how the collective desire for upward mobility in the postsocialist era has empowered lower class *tongzhi* men to navigate social and economic survival. Under the current state-perpetuated neoliberal ideology where “economic development takes precedence over everything else” (p. 97), money boys of rural origin, she argues, receive a certain freedom to appropriate the

definition of “success in purely economic terms” (ibid.) as a moral justification for their engagement in sex work.

Other than providing a critical reading of the above-mentioned phenomena, what also distinguishes *Tongzhi Living* from other qualitative studies on similar research populations and subject matters is the wide array of primary sources Zheng uses in constructing her analysis. In fact, compared to the growing number of works on contemporary Chinese same-sex cultures published in the last decade, Zheng’s study is relatively large-scale and comprehensive. It triangulates between her extensive fieldwork engagement with *tongzhi* men, interviews with heterosexual-identified members of the general public, and her own self-reflexive accounts as a filial daughter who is “caught between personal desires and cultural constraints” (p. 24). By empathetically highlighting the docility of the different parties involved, including the parents and heterosexual wives of *tongzhi* men, the book makes an important intervention to challenge the demonizing representations in public and popular discourses where “homosexuality has become a scapegoat onto which anxiety over current social problems such as dissolved marriages is displaced” (p. 12).

Although *Tongzhi Living* makes a significant contribution to advancing the investigation of same-sex cultures in urban China, readers should be aware of two interrelated epistemological issues which have implications for knowledge production. First, Zheng’s study has, noticeably and rather surprisingly, reproduced a self-orientalizing, evolutionary narrative of Chinese same-sex culture as projected through a Chinese-Western, ancient-modern binary. In contrast to *Tongzhi Living*, a sizable amount of recent, extensive studies, particularly those focusing on the geopolitical peripheries of the Sinophone sphere such as Taiwan,¹ have challenged the reductionist views of the previously scholarly generation. The latter had assumed homophobia was solely the result of Western influences from the Republican Era onwards.² Rather than problematizing the contestations between the sex/gender systems of China and the West, interestingly, Zheng has affirmed this dualistic conception of homophobia in her

¹ See, e.g. Hans Tao-Ming Huang. *Queer Politics and Sexual Modernity in Taiwan*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011; Liu, Jen-peng, and Ding Naifei. "Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6.1 (2005): 30-55; Fran Martin. *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film and Public Culture*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003.

² See, e.g. Chou Wah-shan. *Hou zhi min tong zhi (Postcolonial Tongzhi)*. Hong Kong: Xianggang tong zhi yanjiu she, 1997; Bret Hinsch. *Passions of the Cut Sleeve*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

historical background (Chapter 1) which contextualizes the discussion throughout the book.

Second, as with the previous critique, while Zheng has continuously compared *tongzhi* men to a wide array of same-sex expressions in the West, Latin America, Melanesia, and Southeast Asia (predominantly using the works of scholars located in North America), existing literature focusing on other Chinese communities (e.g. Hong Kong and Taiwan) has rarely been deployed as a frame of reference. This scarcity of dialogues with theories and case studies of cultural and geographical proximities marks *Tongzhi Living* as an anthropological text that reflects the uneven power relationships that mediate the production of local queer knowledge. Indeed, can any studies of same-sex cultures in transnational Chinese societies claim equal legitimacy without referencing parallel case studies in the PRC? Despite these shortcomings, *Tongzhi Living* is, nevertheless, an exceptional ethnography in its own right which substantially contributes to our understanding of same-sex-attracted men in urban China.

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