

From the Marginals to the Transgressive Alliance. A Combined Book Review Essay**Jamie J. Zhao (University of Warwick)****Howard Chiang, ed. *Transgender China*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012. 304 pp. ISBN 978 1 137 08250 3 (ebook).****Howard Chiang, and Ari Larissa Heinrich, eds. *Queer Sinophone Cultures*. London and New York: Routledge, 2014. 231 pp. ISBN 978 0 203 59092 8 (ebook).**

The two exceptional, significant anthologies on Chinese-speaking nonnormative cultures of gender and sexuality, *Transgender China (TC)*, edited by Howard Chiang, and *Queer Sinophone Cultures (QSC)*, edited by Howard Chiang and Ari Larissa Heinrich, were published in 2012 and 2014, respectively. They offer wealthy collections of exciting, critical essays on gender- and sexuality-related literary, filmic, historical, and medical discourses within, on, and across both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Sinophone communities. The sophisticated theories and methodologies put forward by the two volumes speak to one another in generative, supportive ways that transcend geocultural and disciplinary boundaries. The approaches of the "Chinese transgender perspective" and a "queer Sinophone critique" proposed and evaluated in the books serve as provocative tools to challenge both Western-centric and Chinese-centric ways of thinking in not only Anglophone academia but also lived experiences. Therefore, they are must-reads for today's scholars and students in the intersected fields of China and Sinophone studies, literature and film studies, and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) studies. For these reasons, it is particularly invaluable for the development of the scholarship in queer China, as well as in queer Asia in general, that the two volumes are revisited and reviewed together.

TC is organized into four major parts and contains eleven chapters in total. The first part (Chapter 1) is Chiang's introduction to the book, while the last part (Chapter 11) is a concise afterword by American trans activist-scholar Susan Stryker, whose studies on transgenderism are constantly referenced in the book. The second (Chapters 2 to 5) and third (Chapters 6 to 10) parts examine historical incidents and local manifestations of transgender cultures.

The introduction provides a useful, neat delineation of the origins, development, contradictions, and highlights of transgender studies in both Western and Asian academia. Chiang pays particular attention to how the term “transgender” has been defined, revised, and contested over the years in relation to studies of feminism, homosexuality, and queerness. He emphasizes historical, geocultural, and linguistic nuances by establishing a more productive scholarly field, namely “Chinese transgender studies.”

The second part of *TC* contains four chapters. Chapter 2, penned by Howard Chiang, is an appealing historical study of the transgenderism of Chinese eunuchism. Through a detailed, gendered rereading of the historical records and contexts surrounding Chinese castration and its medical operation process in the 19th and 20th centuries, his study suggests that eunuchism is a transgender experience, the knowledge of which should be historicized and contested in a nuanced way, especially within discourses on nationalism, modernization, and civilization. Chiang’s research serves as a convincing example of a historical account of the social reality of Chinese eunuchism, employed to resist a universalist (or Western-centric, hegemonic) definition of transgenderism. Chapter 3 presents an equally interesting historical search for nonnormatively gendered bodies and ideas promoted in Chinese Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist traditions between 1368 and 1911. Similar to Chiang in his research, author Daniel Burton-Rose identifies the normative, patriarchal sociocultural context of China in this historical period, which paradoxically opens up utopian spaces for representations of mismatches between sex, gender, and sexuality, yet also, circumscribes the idealization of gender fluid and transgressive imaginaries prevalent in the canonical texts. Chapter 4 continues to inspect the idealization of androgyny in classical Chinese literature. When examining one of the most popular fiction genres in late imperial China—the seemingly heterosexually structured scholar-beauty (*caizi jiaren*) romance—author Zuyan Zhou notes that both male and female characters in this genre often embody traits of androgyny, which signals the Chinese literati’s gendered consciousness and expresses their own identity as marginal men in a context filled with drastic religious, ethnic, and social-political transformations and struggles. The last chapter in this part is an impressive piece by Alvin Ka Hin Wong that explores Sinophone adaptations of a famous Chinese story—*Legend of the White Snake*—across genres, time, and space. Focusing on the recurrent transgender maneuvers in the story and its adaptations, Wong presents a surprisingly exhaustive survey of *renyao*, a type of Chinese transgender character featured in the story. Through a transgender interpretation of a wide

range of classical fiction, contemporary novels, TV dramas, and films adapted from the original story, Wong identifies a constantly mutated subjugation of femininity in diverse media reconfigurations of *renyao*. As Wong highlights, this phenomenon ultimately reflects the sociocultural situatedness, constructedness, and intricacy of Chinese transgender embodiment.

The third part of the book contains five chapters, beginning with Chapter 6 by Larissa N. Heinrich. Heinrich rereads the syncretization of “transgenre” and transgender potential in late Taiwanese lesbian writer Qiu Miaojin’s “semiepistolary, memoirlike experimental novel” *Last Words from Montmartre* (p. 162), and understands the novel as a manifestation of mutually enabled genre and gender heterogeneities that transcends categorized and gendered literary forms, languages, and codes. Similar to Wong’s chapter, Heinrich’s study also uncovers a Sinophone tone embedded in the novel’s creative adoption and mixing of diverse literary genres, gendered expressions, and sociocultural traces. As Heinrich points out, the novel can be seen as a type of literary transgenderism. Chapter 7, by Helen Hok-Sze Leung, turns to explore the Chinese filmic representations of transgender figures. Leung offers a wide, careful survey of three models of transgender representations in Chinese-speaking movies: “gender variant characters and their cultural meanings,” transgender as “a term of relationality,” and trans practices that “[denote] various modification practices that transform bodily being” (p. 186–87). Through her thorough study of Chinese film through a transgender lens, Leung concludes that trans cinema enriches the possibilities of interpreting, imagining, and understanding transgenderism in socioculturally specific contexts. The proceeding chapter by Carlos Rojas shifts its focus to transgender artistic performances by Beijing-based artist Ma Liuming. Drawing on Judith Butler’s gender performativity theory, Rojas traced the artist’s transgender bodily performances to the traditions of transgender representations in both Chinese opera and classical literature. Following this discussion on transgender art, Chapter 9, by Chao-Jung Wu, examines another form of transgender performance in 1990s’ Taiwan: the male cross-dressing (*fanchuan*) performances by artists from the Redtop troupe. However, Wu maps out a dissimilar, less subversive picture. As Wu points out, the heteronormative and misogynistic traces and logic that underpin these artists’ onstage performances and offstage behaviors paradoxically epitomize both the performative nature of gender and sexuality and deeply rooted discriminative and repressive sociocultural structures. The last chapter describes an ethnographic study on transgender people in Hong Kong. The author, Pui

Kei Eleanor Cheung, reveals the subjective voices and struggles in Hong Kong transgender people's social lives.

Similar to *TC*'s structure, *QSC* is comprised of twelve chapters and organized into seven sections. The first part (Chapter 1) is an introduction to the volume by one of the editors, Ari Larissa Heinrich, while the last part (Chapter 12) is a short afterword by renowned, field-founding scholar Shu-mei Shih, whose Sinophone theory is heavily referenced throughout the book. The five main parts of the book, each of which contains two chapters, offer case studies in film and literature from not only mainland China (Chapter 6) but also across Sinophone communities, such as Hong Kong (Chapters 2, 5, 6, and 11), Taiwan (Chapters 3 and 4), Malaysia (Chapter 10), and Singapore (Chapter 7).

In the introduction, Heinrich explicates the theoretical and methodological features and the potential of queer Sinophone studies. As he illustrates, some similarities and parallels exist between the logic of queer theory (challenging the dimorphisms of gender and sexuality) and Sinophone studies (challenging the dichotomous hegemony of China and the West) (p. 3). Following previous research that creatively crystalizes these two research approaches,¹ Heinrich highlights *QSC* as an ambitious project conducted through a queer Sinophone lens to expose the multilayered constructedness of the "periphery" in the cultural productions of gender and sexual minorities straddling "the margins of China and Chineseness" (p. 5). Meanwhile, this approach also strives to uncover how, theoretically and methodologically, the concepts of "transnational," "Chinese", and "queer" can be productively demystified and utilized in a queer Sinophone context. Following on from this conceptualization, each chapter in the subsequent sections showcases how a queer Sinophone culture can be voiced, imagined, and researched in diverse, captivating ways and thus serves as a new conjunctive method that maximizes the potential of both fields.

The second part of *QSC*, "New Chronotopes," includes two chapters that queerly challenge conventional nationalist interpretations of film and literature from a historical viewpoint. Chapter 2, by Howard Chiang, can be partly seen as a theoretical (and historical) introduction to the queer Sinophone approach. By questioning the existing chronotypes of the queer and the Sinophone, Chiang provides both a historicization of queer sexuality in China and a redefinition of "Chineseness" as anti-China-centric cultural identification. In addition, through a Sinophone

¹ See Audrey Yue and Olivia Khoo. "From Diasporic Cinema to Sinophone Cinema: An Introduction." *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 6.1 (2012): 9-13.

interpretation of queer texts, he understands Hong Kong director Stanley Kwan's gay film *Lan Yu* (2001) as a queer Sinophone reflection on the geopolitical tensions between mainland China and other Sinophone communities. Alternatively, Chapter 3, by Yin Wang, presents a queer rereading of a Sinophone novella, *The Ancient Capital*, written by Taiwanese author Zhu Tianxin. Wang uncovers how female homoeroticism is narrated as a transnational desire that poses cultural and political resistance in Taiwan before and after its martial law period (1987). Meanwhile, through an investigation of the deployment of foreign texts and maneuvers in Zhu's writing, Wang shows that this writing technique signifies a Sinophone self-reflexivity and challenge to the intertwined heteronormative and nationalist hegemonies in Taiwan.

The third part explores queer Sinophone remaking practices. Chapter 4, by Tze-lan D. Sang, examines the postcolonial and postmodern ways in which contemporary Taiwanese author Wu Jiwen appropriates both late imperial Chinese and modern Japanese literary sources in his 1996 queer novel *The Fin-de-siecle Boy Love Reader*. In so doing, Sang demonstrates the diverse cultural and historical roots (in this case, Japanese, French, and imperial Chinese) of Sinophone queer writing in post-martial-law Taiwan and thereby challenges the assumption of a simplistic influence imposed on contemporary Taiwan's emerging queer culture by Western modernity and Chinese hegemony. The subsequent elaborative research in Chapter 5, by Lily Wong, shifts its focus to film. L. Wong deftly looks at the changing marketing strategy with examples such as the strategical incorporation of traditional Chinese cultural elements in film as employed by the Hong Kong Shaw Brothers studio in its production, adaptation, and distribution of soft-core pornography in the 1970s and 1980s. Using the female homoerotic film *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan* (1972) and its remake in 1984, *Lust for Love of a Chinese Courtesan*, as illustrative cases, L. Wong finds that the intertwining cultural narrations of both "Chineseness" and female homoeroticism in the movies are tactically framed and carefully adjusted in order to accommodate the constantly changing sociocultural conditions of the studio's global mainstream market and its target Sinophone audience.

Part Four examines kinship in queer Sinophone cultural productions. Chapter 6, by Alvin Ka Hin Wong, unpacks the role of kinship in the anti-hetero-patriarchal novels of two female authors, Chen Ran from PRC and Huang Biyun from Hong Kong. Drawing on Jack Halberstam's theory of the "queer art of failure,"² A.K.H. Wong shows that female characters in the fictions of

² See, Jack Halberstam. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

the two authors reject normative national-familial systems and search for queer forms of kinship either within the margin of postsocialist China (in Chen's novel) or through transnational migration to the West (in Huang's novel). Ultimately, both authors' novels epitomize certain queer Sinophone possibilities that are "foundationally alternative, anti-capitalist, and non-capitalist" (p. 126). The other chapter in this part, by E.K. Tan, excavates a different kind of Sinophone queer reworking of the conventional kinship system imagined in the 2007 Singaporean gay film *Solos* (dir. Loo Zihan). Through textual and contextual analyses of the film's depiction of homosexuality contrasted with the hetero-patrilineal sociocultural conditions of its production and distribution, Tan argues that the film's queer negotiation of kinship not only challenges the homogenization and marginalization of heteropatriarchal kinship system but also discursively ridicules Sinophone Singaporean heteronormative sociocultural regulations.

Part Five zooms in on the enthralling framing of sexuality in the films of Tsai Ming-liang, who is also known for his unique Sinophone background. The chapter by Guo-Juin Hong concentrates on how space is visually (and often uncomfortably) represented in Tsai's film. Hong's analysis reveals that queer Sinophone representations of sex acts and space, such as gay cruising in Taipei's bath houses, which dominate Tsai's film, often extend to off-screen spaces and frustrate the spectator. Chapter 9, by Kenneth Chan, unveils a form of "queer connections" in Tsai's film *I Don't Sleep Alone* (2006). The concept refers to the ways the film frames queer sexuality in a Sinophone Malaysian setting that exposes the interconnected issues of race, sexuality, class, disability, and ecological environment in a postcolonial Malaysia.

The sixth part is comprised of two chapters calling for the rethinking of potential contradictions generated by and within the dialogue between the queer and the Sinophone. Chapter 10, by Hee Wai Siam and Ari Larissa Heinrich, investigates queer films set against a Sinophone Malaysian cultural backdrop yet produced by Yasmin Ahmad, a non-Sinophone, Malaysian, Muslim, queer woman. The authors adroitly argue that the films demonstrate that Sinophonicity can be tactically deployed for non-Sinophone queer articulation and subject-making (like that of the director). The final main chapter, by Andrea Bachner, serves as a conclusion to the book by reviewing the intersection of queer and Sinophone theories and asking what queerness and Sinophonicity can add to each other. It references a "volatile alliance" found in the lesbian Sinophone film *Butterfly* (2004) directed by Mak Yan Yan. As Bachner explains, the multilayered, complex Sinophonicity in the film's border-crossing textual adaptation, intertextual referencing,

linguistic mixing, and historical and cultural reminiscing showcases both “a queering of Chinese identity and a Sinophone reflection on queerness” (p. 206).

These two pioneering volumes work together to carve out a transgressive, scholarly space from a combination of anti-China-centric, de-Westernized, anti-capitalist, non-heteronormative and anti-patriarchal perspectives. Some chapters in the two books actually engage in critical conversation with each other. For instance, the term “Sinophone” is mentioned and used as a productive research tool in some chapters (e.g., Chiang’s, Wong’s, and Heinrich’s) in *TC*. However, *TC* does not spend much space elucidating the meaning of the term. Interestingly, Striker remarks in the afterword of *TC* that the book, while greatly contributing to both Sinophone and transgender studies, signals a start for more productive, intricate scholarly exchanges between Anglophone and Sinophone scholarship on Chinese history and queer cultures. This comment somewhat presages the birth of *QSC* two years later. In the meantime, although the *QSC* editors constantly emphasize that the research collected in the volume showcases how queer Sinophone cultural productions from “outside of China” can be understood, *QSC* actually includes compelling studies that indicate how a queer Sinophone production can transgress the borders between mainland China (or PRC) and Sinophone communities through either cross-regional co-productions or transcultural imaginations. In this sense, *QSC* can be seen as an effective sequel to *TC* and an outstanding extension of the theory of Chinese transgender studies.

The two books also share a similar deficit. Although some chapters in both briefly discuss class hierarchy and cultural elitism, all the essays largely focus on high-brow or elitist cultural forms, such as classic literature and film. Except for some analyses that briefly mention online fan sites and TV dramas (e.g., A.K.H. Wong’s chapter in *TC*), no attention is paid to popular and grassroots cultural forms and practices, such as popular music, Sinophone aboriginal performances and arts, and digital culture.

In summary, *TC* and *QSC* are undeniably two beautifully written, thought-provoking collections. They are historically and culturally rich and insightful and methodologically innovative and persuasive. Combined, they not only illustrate but also facilitate the flourishing of wide-ranging possibilities for conjunction among LGBTQ, China, and Sinophone studies. For academic readers and members of the general public who are interested in these intersected fields of scholarly inquiry, reading them together is tremendously beneficial, inspiring, and enjoyable.