
This timely study of gay identity and tongzhi activism in postsocialist China brings together critical analysis of queer cultural production, ethnography and archival work to bear on transnational and contemporary Chinese queer studies. It is the first to offer an in-depth rumination on the complex relations between China’s socialist legacy, postsocialist neoliberalization and the emergence of queer culture. Drawing from concrete experiences of queer political activism and everyday life, Queer Comrades traces the ways in which China’s socialist past has shaped postsocialist queer identities and social movements. It opens up possibilities for alternatives that go beyond the Western post-Stonewall model of queer politics. The book provides valuable sources for scholars and general audience who are interested in the changing dynamics of Chinese and transnational queer studies.

The book starts with the emergence of tongzhi —originally means “comrade” but has become a Chinese lexicon for LGBT, especially for gay men, and its various articulations. Using Shanghai as a case study, chapter 2 stresses that queer desires and culture are simultaneously shaped by transnational cosmopolitanism, China’s historical homoeroticism and its postsocialist state. Chapter 3 offers a genealogy of the term tongzhi, representing an appropriation of the word for new purposes, in order to unravel its politicized history and radical political potential. Bao highlights crucial moments when the term was used in both the Republican and Maoist era for egalitarian and revolutionary inspirations, as well as in present queer appreciation of the term in order to “reinvent(ing) a radical political identity and queer politics by denaturalizing the present and drawing on the legacies from the past” (pp. 91).

This politicized queer identity and radical politics are further articulated in chapter 7 on tongzhi self-mobilization, a chapter that perhaps best captures the book’s argument and ambitious political agenda. Bao documents a crucial incident when tongzhi gay men stood up against police harassment and raids at a cruising park in central Guangzhou. By invoking the socialist concept of renmin (the people), ordinary gay men were able to assert and struggle for citizenship rights. Bao makes an extremely provocative analysis when distinguishing Chinese
use of “citizenship rights” from the rhetoric of “human rights”. While the latter is heavily loaded with Cold War ideology and often used by Western countries to level accusations against China, the former recognizes state sovereignty and the specificity of a culture. Bao thus contends that queer claims to “citizenship rights” through renmin without recourse to “human rights” discourse can be seen as a culturally sensitive strategy for queer politics and a critique of universalism and Eurocentrism (pp. 179). The same insight into decentering Western liberalism also runs through chapter 4, in which Bao contextualizes the medical practice of conversation therapy in the 1980s and 1990s in relation to China’s own project of modernity (pp. 95-97).

Another two chapters to highlight are chapter 5 on queer film maker Cui Zi’en and chapter 6 on queer film festivals. Bao reads Cui’s life story and film making as representative of “Chinese queer Marxism” that disrupts a Euro-American-centric liberal mode of queer theorization. Similarly, Bao draws our attention in chapter 6 to young filmmakers who use their digital video activism to reach ordinary queer people, build shared experience and sociality, and reclaim public space that is often marked by heteronormality, state surveillance and commercialism.

Given the contradiction between the wealth of the book’s empirical material and the length limit of the publication, the book leaves some important questions unanswered. For example, the difference between and connections among Marxism, Chinese socialism and leftist politics are never fully interrogated. Often Bao uses these words interchangeably. Among the topics on which I would have liked to know more are: what was queer life like in Chinese high socialism and how this impacts on queer subjectivity in the past and present; how the framing of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” and the troubled relationship with traditional Marxism this represents shape queer experience and activism; and how leftist/Marxist queer politics are imagined differently in China and in the West. This is a missed opportunity because this book, as Bao states, has much to contribute to the emerging scholarship on sexuality and socialism/Marxism (the work of Petrus Liu, Peter Drucker, Kevin Floyd, Emily Hobson, among others) and the debate on “queer globalization”. While Bao provides a detailed genealogy of tongzhi, it is important to note that it was at the time of Hong Kong’s handover to the Mainland when Edward Lam and Chou Wah-shan, both Hong Kong based scholars, appropriated tongzhi
for queer use and advocated it for queer people in Chinese societies. How their understanding of the concept from their post-colonial locations might differ from that of those who live under socialism and simply use the word as a euphemism seems to disappear from Bao’s analysis. While the book provides a wide range of theoretical positions, the reader would also benefit from more contextualization of these theories. For example, while chapter 4 is rigorous on tracing the linkage, rather than rupture, of Maoist and post-Mao notions of the self, the simplified use of Foucauldian theorization of biopolitics and governmentality flattens out the complexity of the socialist condition and of medical authority.

Although the book could have been enhanced by including more experience of queer women and transgender people, *Queer Comrade* is an exemplary study that introduces important questions into the field of queer studies, and demonstrates the strengths of interdisciplinarity, engaged ethnography and community-based activist scholarship.

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